

Sunday 19th November 2017: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST.
YR. A

Readings: Judges 4:1-10; Ps 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30

“More will be given to those who use their talents wisely”

Little Philip was spending the weekend with his grandmother after a particularly trying week in infant school. His grandmother decided to take him to the park on Saturday morning. It had been snowing all night and everything was beautiful.

His grandmother commented, 'Doesn't it look like an artist painted this scenery? Did you know God painted this just for you?'

'Yes,' replied Philip, 'God did it and he did it left handed.'

This confused his grandmother, so she asked him, 'What makes you say God did this with his left hand?' 'Well,' said Philip, 'we learned at Sunday School last week that Jesus sits on God's right hand.'

In the Name of God, the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week's Gospel speaks of how Jesus' disciples are to conduct themselves as they await the Kingdom of Heaven. In the preceding passages and in last week's Gospel, Jesus taught that there is no way to predict the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. His disciples must, therefore, remain vigilant and ready to receive the Son of Man at any time.

When Jesus began the parable, he created additional suspicions. The rich man most likely lived abroad (i.e., he was a foreigner). As he prepared for his journey home, he delegated his underlings to invest his fortune. While the eight silver talents described in 25:15 had a current value of \$3 million, such wealth seemed uncountable to the impoverished contemporaries of Jesus. [25:14-16]

Jesus' parable talks about Christian discipleship using economic metaphors. Before he leaves on a journey, the master entrusts to his servants a different number of talents, giving to each according to their abilities.

A *talent* is a coin of great value. Upon the master's return, he finds that the first and second servants have doubled their money, and both are rewarded. The third servant, however, has only preserved what was given to him because he was afraid to lose the money.

He has risked nothing; he did not even deposit the money in a bank to earn interest. This servant is punished by the master, and his talent is given to the one who brought the greatest return.

What would a cautious, honourable employee do? Bilking money from the poor was immoral. Without government controls or insurance, no investment was truly safe. So, the honourable man would bury his master's money. Hidden away far from one's dwelling, no thief could find a man's gold or silver. And, since inflation in the ancient economic order was unimaginable, money maintained constant buying power from generation to generation. Even Jewish rabbis insisted that anyone who buried his master's money was not liable for it, since this was the most prudent course of action. [25:18]

Yet, Jesus belittled the prudent man and praised the extortionist as the image that revealed the Kingdom. Why would Matthew's audience be attracted to this parable? There are three possible answers. First, God worked outside the boundaries of good taste or the moral edicts of the self-righteous. God even used evil for his own ends (witness the crucifixion). Anything, even the greed of evil men, could reveal the Kingdom.

Second, Jesus ministered to the outlaw and the outcast. These people helped to form the original Christian communities. The outlaw and the outcast identified with principles in the parable as their own.

Third, Matthew's audience lived on the fringes of society. Excommunicated by Pharisaic Judaism, the Jewish-Christians of Matthew's community felt persecuted by their Jewish brethren and ignored by the non-Jews. The believers in the evangelist's community only had each other for financial and moral support. To be sure, the early faithful heard the words "Christian" and "sinner" whispered in the same sentence. For, they suffered the same public ridicule as the extortionist and his underlings.

How did Matthew's audience understand the parable? Let us consider Matthew's gospel for clues. Since the master gave his servants wealth, he meant those riches invested, even risked, for increased returns. The only parallel to an increase occurred in Matthew 13:3-9, the parable of the sower and the seed. Jesus interpreted these images in Matthew 13:18-23, where the preacher represented the sower and the Word represented the seed. The increase of the harvest represented the power of the Word in the hearts of people who became Christians.

If we draw a parallel between the two parables, the uncountable riches were the Word and the servants of the master were evangelising Christians. Since God's Word was dynamic, the results of its use were equally dynamic. Those who preached the Word enjoyed its fruits and the promise of the Master's favour.

Considering last week's parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, this parable teaches that God's judgement will be based on the service we render to God and to one another in accordance with the gifts that God has given to us. Our gifts, or talents, are given to us for the service of others. If we fail to use these gifts, God's judgement on us will be severe. On the other hand, if we make use of these gifts in service to the Kingdom of Heaven, we will be rewarded and entrusted with even more responsibilities.

This Gospel reminds us that Christian spirituality is not passive or inactive. Our life of prayer helps us to discern the gifts that have been given to us by God. This prayer and discernment ought to lead us to use our gifts in the service of God and our neighbour. God's grace allows us to share in the work of serving the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.