

Homily: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

It's always nice to receive an invitation. In normal times we may get invited to a wedding, a baptism, a birthday party, some other happy event. In each case, the person who invites us is really saying: "Come and share my joy! This is a wonderful moment in my life and I want you to share in this happiness." We can hear an echo of this in today's Gospel, where the master returns from his travels and says to those who have used their talents wisely, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness." Come and join in your master's happiness: if ever there were a line of Scripture which sums up God's constant invitation to us, this is it. Come and join in your Master's happiness. In heaven, God is perfectly happy, of course, and He wants us to share in that joy. He wants it so much that, in the person of Jesus Christ, He left behind that perfect happiness to come and share our sufferings on earth. He came precisely to invite us: Come and join in your Master's happiness. That's God's will for us; that's His constant invitation.

To accept this invitation, we need to do what the master in the parable says: we must learn to be faithful in small things. The servants in the Gospel received talents: five, two or one – actually a talent was a vast sum of money, and to each of these servants it probably felt like a huge responsibility. But to the master, it's a small thing. Sometimes in our lives we feel burdened by difficulties and problems, but to God, everything is small. He asks us to be faithful in the small ups and downs of our lives, so that we can be entrusted with greater things, and share in His joy in eternal life.

Last week we heard another parable, in which the ten bridesmaids were accompanying the groom on his wedding night. As we noted then, the wedding feast is an image of heaven, because eternal life is the everlasting loving union of Christ and His bride, the Church. In today's first reading we are invited to reflect a bit more on this. It starts with a provocative question: "The perfect wife – who can find her?" It goes on to speak of her qualities, which include trustworthiness, a concern for the poor, generosity and wisdom. We might wonder what this has to do with the Gospel – it's not immediately obvious. But we are given this reading to say to us: the Church is called to be the 'perfect wife', a perfect bride for the Lord, filled with faithfulness, generosity, concern for the poor, and wisdom. So when the reading says, "Give her a share in what her hands have worked for", it really means the same as that line from today's Gospel: "You have been faithful in little things; come and join in your master's happiness." "You have worked towards this joy", God says, "Now come and share in it".

But what about the servant who only receives one talent? He receives a harsh rebuke from the master. What has gone wrong? He himself explains it: "I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered; so I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground." The master calls him "wicked and lazy"; but it's not as if he did nothing at all. It takes effort to dig a hole! The real problem is that he was paralysed by fear. He did not trust his master – the master is a hard man, demanding. So he could not take the risk of losing his master's money.

At a basic level, we understand this parable very easily. We have all been given talents, and we are not to bury them, but to use them for the Lord and in service of others. These talents may be personal qualities, wealth, resources of one kind or another. Each one of us has received different gifts and we are called to use them fully. But sometimes we know we don't use our talents as well as we might. Sometimes it can be out of laziness; but, like the servant in the Gospel, it can also be out of fear.

The servant was afraid of his master, so the talent was buried. Could that be true of us? Are there times when we are afraid of God? We perhaps fear that He might be too demanding, He may ask us to carry a cross that we can't bear; He may take from us something or someone dear to us. And so we are afraid and find it hard to trust Him. We therefore rely on ourselves and not on Him. And because of this, our true potential is never realised.

If it seems hard to see this, let's look at it the other way round. There are many great saints who have done incredible things: St Francis of Assisi, St Clare, and many like them, who gave up everything they had to live a life of poverty for the Lord. There are many others, who gave up their own plans to follow a path the Lord had set for them. Or we can think of the martyrs, who gave their lives with great courage to witness to their faith. We might be tempted to think that these great men and women simply weren't afraid of the world, or the future, or death; but I don't think that's true: they knew very well the dangers and sufferings they could face. I think, instead, that they weren't afraid of God, or His plans for them. They had enough faith to put everything into God's hands, trusting Him completely, even with their lives; and because of this, their real potential was unlocked, and they were able to achieve so much more than they would have by relying on their own merits. To trust the Lord completely – this enables us to use all our gifts, all our talents, without fear of failure, of loss, of suffering, or of anything that might happen.

The fearful servant in the Gospel believed that his master reaped where he had not sown, and gathered where he had not scattered. Perhaps that was true of the master in the story; but it cannot be true of God. Every good action, every work of service, every sacrifice made of love: these are part of God's harvest. But they are not reaped where God has not sown, because every good act comes from a seed of grace which the Lord has planted in our hearts. Wherever there is a harvest of love, there was first a seed of grace. He gives His grace so freely, yet so often it remains buried because of our fear. May the Lord free our hearts to live for Him in love, without any fear of Him or His plans for us, so that every seed of grace, every talent, may yield a rich harvest in our lives, and so that one day we may share fully in our Master's joy.

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