

Some words for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

*'Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.'*¹



Readings:

Proverbs 31:10-13. 19-20. 30-31 Psalm 127:1-5. R.v.1
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 Matthew 25:14-30

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Like most European tongues English is littered with words and phrases that are scriptural in origin and many of the metaphors and allusions that we still use were born within the pages of the bible. Today's gospel provides a fascinating example of this with regard to our use of the word *talent*. In the English language we use the word figuratively, and we often speak of someone as possessing a particular gift or special ability; of someone having an artistic or sporting talent for example. This usage entered our language by way of today's parable, and so our first hurdle is to set aside what we know and usually mean by the word *talent* and to think of it as Jesus did, as a word referring to weight, in particular to a sum of money. In other

words, today's gospel is not about our abilities and we must set aside such notions if we are to understand what the Lord is speaking about. The sums of money involved are large.

One talent has been estimated as being worth the wages of around fifteen to twenty years of labour so all of the sums mentioned in the parable are life-changing. However, the presence of money at the heart of the parable does not mean that the parable is about wealth either and we aren't being asked to consider how we might invest or manage a wealth-fund. Despite the efforts of some evangelicals, especially within the United States, this is not a parable urging us to consider 'The Prosperity Gospel' – that surely misguided belief that proof of God's blessing and will for us lies in our wealth and physical well-being. We are not justified before God by how much cash we have. Even the servant who only had one talent didn't actually lose it; he still had plenty of money.

As last week, we are being asked to consider the kingdom of heaven and what it is like. Knowing he was going to be away for some time, a man who has eight talents decides to entrust his wealth to his three servants, and so he gives one five, another two and, finally, the other one. The master will be away for '*a long time*'² and so he entrusted his wealth to his servants each '*in proportion to*'³ their ability. When he eventually returned he went over the accounts and he found the first servant had made five more talents, doubling his return. The second had also doubled his return and made two more talents. Clearly the master had judged the respective abilities of these servants well. However, the third servant simply returned the single talent he had been given.

Addressing this parable to his disciples shortly before his own forthcoming journey '*abroad*'⁴ to his Father, what then we might ask is actually being entrusted to the servants, the disciples of the Lord? There are a number of interpretations that draw out differing aspects of the parable and indeed it contains much for spiritually fruitful consideration. Even if we apply the parable by seeing the talents as something akin to life resources, such as time or money, what matters is that the one talent they are all given, the minimum, is still sufficient to achieve something with. After all, the two servants who make a return upon their master's property are not praised for the amount they make but for being '*good and faithful*.'⁵

In sharp contrast to the third servant the first two took their assigned talents '*and promptly went and traded with them*.'⁶ The Greek verb *eutheos* translated here as 'promptly' alludes to the enthusiasm of the servants for their task, while the idea conveyed by the word 'traded' suggests they worked at the matter before, finally, they 'made' a return on their activity. Crucially, the word 'made' can also be rendered as 'won' and it is used thus by Jesus earlier in St Matthew's gospel, when he speaks of how the disciple may win back his errant brother.⁷ Suddenly, we begin to see more clearly just what it is that has been entrusted to all the servants.

Jesus had previously declared to his disciples, *'the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you ... For anyone who has will be given more ... but from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away.'*⁸ If this is so then we can perhaps better understand why the *'wicked and lazy servant'*⁹ is a man *'who has not [and so] ... even what he has will be taken away.'*¹⁰ It is knowledge of the Good News, the gospel of salvation that the servants have all received, and the third servant has done nothing with his master's trust other than to take the talent and hide it away; *'No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub.'*¹¹ Although the master may be a long time in his return each servant will have to give an account of their stewardship.

The first two servants will share in their master's joy because they set about their work with fervour; they persevered, and enjoyed no little success also. Prepared and able to give an account to their master they are thus ready to be trusted with even greater responsibilities. Emboldened by their master's faith in them these servants take their opportunity to express their gratitude and repay his trust. The third servant on the other hand is afraid of his master and, paralysed by his fears, he buries the talent and thereby hopes to absolve himself of all responsibility. Rabbinic custom held that someone who buried money in a secret location could not be reckoned accountable for its loss. Now, as it happens, the master had so far treated his servants extraordinarily well, yet this servant says to him, *'I had heard you were a hard man.'*¹² Here he is making it clear that he knew he had failed his master, and thus he immediately adopted a defensive and regretful tone, as he sought to explain away what he had done or, as in this case, not done. Although incredibly generous the master can apparently appear hard as he delivers right and just judgement and this servant has found himself immobilised by his own fears. Thus, paradoxically, his fears come to pass and the man is condemned by his own words; *'so you knew!'*¹³

The master treated each of the three servants as individuals and he allocated his talents in accordance with each of their abilities. Inevitably, we can all find things that are undemanding or overwhelming but they will be different for each of us. All three servants received a great treasure and a wonderful opportunity. The first two servants went to work and made the best of their opportunity, presumably, they also took a risk. They clearly did not believe that the master would punish them for every mistake and they could not have acted and delivered so outstanding a return had they not trusted their master. Eager to please, they must have felt a certain freedom and have had confidence in his judgement. We now see that they were infused with a sense of God's loving mercy, not with God's wrath.

Unfortunately, the third servant was bound and circumscribed by his fear and his talent became a burden to him. Ironically, we can all battle with low self-esteem, (even while professing a belief in a God who loves us and who died on a cross for us!), but the malaise in this servant's heart runs deeper. Like the others he received a life-changing opportunity but it is his selfishness and not his fear that is his true sin. All too often we can hear the voice that whispers to us, *I really can't do anything...*

even if I could, it wouldn't make a difference... my presence won't matter either way ... no one will notice. Sadly, the very power of his master tempted the servant to think that his contribution wasn't really needed or wanted. He was to be sorely mistaken. God gives us a great deal but it is not wholly ours to do with as we please. Giving the matter little thought, and making no effort to try anything, the servant's mind was filled with excuses. Alas, when we think of the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son we might pity the servant who did not realise just how much his master would be willing to forgive him. It was his indolence and neglect that condemned him; his inability to look beyond himself to the other and, above all, to trust in God.

Our physical life on earth is the greatest gift that God first bestows upon us. However, the gift of faith, which opens to us the possibility of eternal life, may be judged to be even greater. Do we believe this? Does the power of the good news of Jesus Christ liberate and guide us? Or, does it inconvenience us, ask too much of us and leave us open to failure or ridicule? All too often we can indeed bury our own gifts and talents, alongside our emotions, memories and relationships, yet the Lord, who himself lay buried, burst forth from his tomb to show us the true path to life and light.

Most of us do not buy a car to leave it in the garage, unless of course we are a vintage car collector, and even then they like to take them out for the occasional spin. There will always be some risk and vulnerability in undertaking the life and work of the gospel and a great deal of effort and self-sacrifice also. However, if we heed the Lord and sincerely attempt to do what he asks of us then, despite any personal failings, we can nonetheless be confident that we too may be invited, to *'come and join in your master's happiness.'*¹⁴ After all, at some point or other, how many of us have said, or have heard said to others or to ourselves, "I only asked you to do one thing?"

*'In the just reward of labour, God's will is done;
in the help we give our neighbour, God's will is done;
in our worldwide task of caring for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvests we are sharing, God's will is done.'*¹⁵

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us*

St Joseph, *pray for us*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

13 November 2020

The picture is of *The Parable of the Talents*, Andrei Mironov, 2013

1. *Now thank we all our God, (Nunc danket)*, verse 1, M. Rinkart, (1636), trans. C. Winkworth

2. *Matthew 25:19*

3. *Matthew 25:15*

4. *Matthew 25:14*

5. *Matthew 25:21*

6. *Matthew 25:16*

7. *Matthew 18:15*

8. *Matthew 13:11-12*

9. *Matthew 25:26*

10. *Matthew 25:29*

11. *Matthew 5:14*

12. *Matthew 25:24*

13. *Matthew 25:26*

14. *Matthew 25:23*

15. *For the fruits of his creation*, verse 2, Rev. F. Pratt Green, (1903 – 2000)