

Homily 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 15th November 2020

Today we have two readings which may make us squirm in protest as we hear or read them.

We have the comments from the Book of Proverbs on ‘the perfect wife’, who is always ‘busy with wool and with flax’, and from whom her husband will ‘derive no little profit.’ Hmm.

Firstly, to note that this reading continues a theme from last Sunday’s Old Testament reading in which Wisdom *herself* is presented in the feminine, as a gracious lady sought by those who love her and are worthy of her. Secondly, to note that the instruction ‘give her a share in what her hands have worked for’ is more ahead of its time than we may realise: it might well have made her husband, if he was paying attention, open his eyes wide in surprise.

We need gracious lady Wisdom by our side as we move on to tackle today’s Gospel: the Parable of the Talents.

The entry-level, vanilla-flavoured interpretation of this parable is that our gifts, skills and *talents* have been given to us by God and He expects us to use them, to build His Kingdom on earth. And when Jesus comes again He will judge us on what we have done with our God-given gifts, skills and talents. This is a perfectly neat, tidy and respectable interpretation and if it satisfies you, that’s great, stay with it. But it doesn’t satisfy me, and it never has done. If you’re happy to take your religion messy, unfinished and full of questions, then let’s take a closer look. Those of a sensitive disposition should look away now.

Is the master really a good God figure? He accepts that he is a hard master, and repeats from his own mouth the description of himself as ‘I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered’. This surely is exploitation. Compare, if you will, this hard master to the generous master in the Parable of the Hired Workers in the Vineyard: he’s the one who pays all the workers the agreed one denarius whether they’ve worked all day or were not hired until later in the day. (*Reminder: we did this one two months ago on the 25th Sunday, Matthew 20:1-16*). One senses that the hard master in today’s parable would have rewarded half a day’s work with only half a denarius. They are very different characters.

We cannot soften Jesus’ use of the word *talent*. It’s only because of later Christian commentary on this parable that the word ‘talent’, meaning gift or skill, exists in our language. In Jesus’ time a talent was unit of currency, nothing more and nothing less. Or to be more precise it was a unit of *weight* of silver; our nearest modern equivalent would be a bar of gold bullion. It was a lot of money.

And what are we to make of the harsh treatment of the one-talent servant? As the talents are given out 'in proportion to ability' we may assume he wasn't the brightest candidate. Maybe he didn't know how banks work and what interest was. Maybe digging a hole was all he knew and he was doing his best. How do we square his fate with 'Happy are the poor in spirit, Blessed are the meek' (*Matthew 5:3,4*) or 'the first will be last, and the last, first' (*Matthew 20:16*)? And in demanding and validating the charging of interest, the master is perilously close to the sin of Usury.

Dare we, then, turn the whole parable upside down? Dare we say that the master is a hard, calculating, exploitative *absentee landlord*, away until 'a long time after'? Of course he likes the five-talent and the two-talent servants, they are just like him, and he's taught them well. Then up steps the hero of the story, the one-talent servant who tells the master *to his face* 'you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered'. He speaks truth unto power. He is the *whistle-blower*. And he receives the usual whistle-blower's reward: to be booted out, with nothing. And he's not a dim-wit after all: the talents are given out according to ability *as assessed by the master*, and this master does not value or recognise the gifts of the Kingdom, the gifts of truth, justice and courage.

Whether you find any traction in this interpretation or whether you're about to report me to Bishop Richard, let's agree on one thing: we should never get too comfortable and cosy with Holy Scripture. It should challenge us and make us think. There is always more to discover, and we can only make discoveries if we're willing to kick some ideas around.

I will end by gathering our thoughts around those of Pope Francis. His vision of the church is not a temple of perfection for the successful. It is a vision of a field hospital for the weak and injured. If we follow this vision then our place is outside the gates, out in the darkness, ready to receive the one-talent servants as they get booted out by a money driven world that does not understand or value them.