

2nd before Advent

**Readings: Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18; Psalm 90: 1-1; I Thessalonians 5: 1-11;
Matthew 25: 14-30**

At first glance the meaning of the story told by Jesus in today's gospel seems clear: make use of the talents or gifts that God has given us. As God has endowed us with the abilities we possess to use for the building up of his kingdom, we should not let these abilities go to waste. In this story or parable God is the wealthy man going on a journey, and we are the slaves to whom the kingdom is entrusted. It is interesting to note that our use of the word 'talent' to mean an inborn ability derives from this story, even though in the story the word refers to a large sum of money, one talent being the equivalent of the wages a day labourer would receive after working for about fifteen years. Could the amazing size of this amount of money stand for the generosity of God to us? After all, everything we think we possess, beginning with our very lives, is a gift of God to us.

I think it is also interesting to consider that the master left his slaves to get on with using what he had given them. He did not force them to use the talents in a certain way. He left it to them to decide what to do. Isn't that God's way with us? God leaves us free to decide what to do with what he has given us.

It is, however, useful to consider why the slave who was given one talent simply buried it in the ground. According to the story it was that slave's fear that kept him from risking the money by investing it. If we think about the world of finance, we know that there is always some risk involved whenever money is invested. It is often true that those investments that have the potential to yield the highest returns are at the same time the riskiest to make. From what Jesus' story tells us the two slaves who doubled their master's money did so willingly and without fear.

Could Jesus be trying here to give us a message about the difference between loving God and fearing God? If we truly love God in Jesus, if we have God in Jesus at the centre of our lives, we not only enjoy serving him; but we are ready to risk all for him. Another way of stating this might be to say that God wants us to be passionate lovers. This really means that we are to strive with all our might to live in love and charity with our neighbours, to be forgivers and reconcilers, and to stand up for justice. To succeed in this we must be motivated by love.

Ah, but I can hear some of you saying that fear can be a great motivator. Yes, fear can motivate us. But the motivation that stems from fear is ultimately a selfish motivation. If we do a good deed, not because we wish to do so, but because we wish to avoid punishment, we are doing that deed out of self-interest. God sees through that, and so, probably, will the recipient of that good deed.

Is it only fear of the risk involved that causes us to bury our talents? I suspect that we

bury them because we see our faith as a sort of insurance policy for troubled times. As long as all is going well, our faith can be a Sunday-morning exercise or even an intellectual assent to a set of propositions. But the church going and the intellectual assent do not really impinge on our day-to-day lives. Most of us dislike change. We do not want our comfortable ways or routines to be upended. We don't want to get involved in anything too risky. We love ourselves and our own ways more than we love God.

Maybe we could ascribe our neglect of our talents to laziness. If deep down we sense the Jesus in whom we believe is calling out to us to take a risk and follow him, really follow him, but we keep trying to put off answering that call, might our laziness, as well as our fear of the unknown be involved?

If on account of our love for Jesus we are willing to heed his call and become involved in the risky business of using what we have been given in order to love our neighbour, especially the neighbour most in need, we will find, if we believe this parable, that one loving action leads to another in a sort of snowball effect. This is the point of the words, 'for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance.' Jesus is talking about love and loving action here, not about monetary wealth.

Those who are unwilling to run the risk of reaching out of themselves in love to others will end up like the fearful slave who buried his talent. In thinking only of himself and his own security he ended up not just empty handed, but in hell, if we take hell to be a state in which we have allowed our selfishness and self-love to cut us off from love, especially the source of all love.

In today's passage from I Thessalonians Paul admonishes us to 'keep awake.' It is so easy to fall asleep. We all do it, just as the disciples did when Jesus asked them to stay awake that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. When I speak of falling asleep here I am thinking of our tendency to take our eyes off Jesus and allow fear, selfishness, or sloth to take over. Could it be that living the Christian life is a process in which we are daily called to think about God and in so doing have our love for him rekindled so that we are ready to conquer our fear, let God's love rule our hearts, and run the risk of living the life of love Jesus calls us to? Isn't this what repentance, forgiveness, and new life in Christ is all about? Yes, we are called to be children of the day, bearers of the Christ light, passionate lovers of God. But we need to be awakened to this calling, every day, even every hour. May God help us stay awake.

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