

33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
Prov 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31  
Ps 128 *passim*  
1Thess 5:1-6  
Mt 25:14-30

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Today is the 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. Next Sunday will honor Christ the King, the last Sunday in our liturgical year, and the Sunday after that will usher in Advent, when we start a new liturgical year.

Next Sunday will therefore mark the end of our journey through the Gospel of Matthew. Our focus will then shift to the Gospel of Mark. For the last few weeks St. Matthew has presented us with parable after parable. Jesus taught in parables – stories with a point, a point that sometimes startles us and always challenges us, a point that is not always obvious. Jesus used parables to teach us what God is like and what God expects of us.

In the most recent parables Jesus has driven home the point that death is lurking around every corner, even when we least expect it, and that each of us must think about rendering an account of what we've done with our life.

That is precisely what the master in today's parable does. Before going away he entrusts his servants with different amounts of money, lots of money, measured in units of weight called talents. Even one talent's worth of gold or silver was an enormous sum. When he eventually comes back, each of them has a story to tell and each one renders an accounting.

The parable invites each of us to take stock, to ask, *What gifts has God given me? How have I used the gifts God has given me? Am I growing in my faith? Am I a better follower of Jesus today than I was before?*

Those are important questions. It is a good and holy thing to ask them. Even so, It is possible that the parable has even more to teach us. Let's take a closer look.

Let's start from the question of how the culture of Jesus's time and place would have understood this parable. Jesus was speaking, remember, to his disciples, a group of ordinary men who looked at the world the way ordinary people of that time and place did. For one thing, they would have raised their eyebrows when they heard the master berate the third servant for not depositing the money with the bankers, because observant Jews did not lend money at interest; collecting *any* interest, in *any* amount, was considered sinful under the Law of Moses as they understood it at that time.

For another thing, the disciples hearing Jesus's parable would have been uncomfortable with the profits that the first two servants earned through their wheeling and dealing. In

Jesus's time folks believed that there was only so much wealth, and that the *only way* anyone got richer was if somebody else got poorer. So, every dollar by which the first and second servants increased their master's wealth came at the expense of other people. It was what today we call a "zero-sum game." And, to his credit, servant no. 3 refused to play. In effect he told the master, "I won't help you get richer at the expense of my neighbors. I will work to put food on my family's table and a roof over their heads, but I won't help you exploit the poor and the wretched." And how does the master react? He throws him out. What happens to the poor? What do the haves do to the have-nots? They exploit them, and they marginalize them. The master – who, incidentally, does *not* speak for Jesus and whom Jesus does *not* hold up as a model – the master says, "To everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." In other words, that's how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer; it's a zero-sum game.

Viewed in this way, the parable is about greed, and it holds up servant no. 3 as a role model for us to follow. Unlike the first two servants, he was not driven to get more. One of the parable's points is that it's not okay to get ahead by lying, cheating, and stealing; it's not okay to exploit human beings. Followers of Jesus do not cast the poor out. Followers of Jesus do not marginalize the poor. On the contrary, in his Gospel St. Matthew proclaims that rich people respond to God's grace by treating the poor and the vulnerable with dignity and care.

Back in February we heard Jesus declare in the Sermon on the Mount, "You cannot serve both God and money. . . . Look at the lilies of the field: they neither sow nor spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these." Next Sunday, on the Feast of Christ the King, Jesus will give us the final exam questions: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was homeless and you sheltered me, naked and you clothed me, in prison and you visited me."

Unlike the people of Jesus's day, most of us do not believe that the economy must be a zero-sum game. Most middle-class Americans believe, generally, that the economic pie can be made bigger and bigger, so that everybody can benefit from a bigger and better slice. But greed is still greed, and greed is still sinful. It is wrong to exploit fellow human beings. It is wrong to grow rich at the expense of the poor. I repeat: it is not wrong to get rich; growing grow rich at the expense of the poor is wrong. The rich, in fact, will be judged by how they help and benefit the poor. Yes, hard work is a virtue (up to a point!). Yes, we are called to be productive members of society and contributing members of the Church. We grow. We work hard in school and at our jobs. We care for our children and our dependent parents. We work to build up the earth in readiness for the Kingdom

of God – to be, in short, responsible human beings. BUT, Jesus tells us, wealth and power are not ends in themselves; they are not what life is about. Don't, he says, put the accumulation of them at the center of our lives, where God alone truly belongs.

At the end of our days, whenever that occurs, each of us will have to render an accounting. What will we have done with the many, beautiful, and precious gifts God has given us? Will we have increased our gifts for the benefit of humankind, and not at the expense of the poor and the vulnerable? Will our lives have given God glory?