

## The parable of the talents.

**A**s the Church's year draws to its close, our readings at Mass point us towards the “last things”: heaven, hell, death and judgement. As we battle a pandemic – even though we are doing well in Australia – sixteen days without a new case in Victoria – the news on the television from overseas sends our thoughts in the same direction. Today's gospel occurs in Matthew as the middle of three stories about judgement: the wise and foolish virgins, whom we heard about last week, this story of the talents, this week, and the separation of the sheep and goats, which occurs next week. Whether we like it or not, whether we choose to think about it or not, death is the ultimate fact of life as we know it in this world ... and after death will come Judgment – a sobering thought.

St. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord will come “like a thief in the night” and that there will be no way for anybody to evade it. He advises them to stay wide awake and sober. What then must we do?

One sometimes hears people say of an office or duty that they exercised, “Well, I hope at least I did no harm.” The phrase goes back to Hippocrates – or perhaps further. Perhaps such people are just being humble – but these three gospels make it clear that such a negative assessment cannot be the goal of a follower of Jesus.

This turns on the difference between judgement in our human courts, and the judgement we will receive before the judgement seat of God. If – God forbid – we are ever called before a secular judge, the best outcome we can hope for is to hear the words, “Not Guilty – you are free to go.” But from God we hope to hear not “You may go”, but “Enter into the joy of the Lord;” not a dismissal, but a call into relationship.

It will not be enough for any of us to say, then, when eventually we stand before that judgment seat, that we never did any harm – the question will be: Did we ever do any good? If not, then we are no better than the good-for-nothing servant in the parable, and, like him, we shall incur the wrath of our Master.

The servant claims that his master is a hard one, whose expectations are so great that the fear of failing to meet them has paralysed him – fearing failure, he dared not attempt to succeed. It is easy enough to identify with him. His master, however, condemns him as a lazy good-for-nothing.

Jesus is telling us that we are not here in this world to play safe. Of course, we *are* to avoid doing wrong – that much is essential if we are to be his disciples – but it is not enough. We are to work tirelessly to make the best possible use of our time, our talents and our opportunities.

Like the “perfect wife” in today's first reading, we (members of the Church which is the Bride of Christ) must be worthy of the confidence He places in us, doing our work with eager hands. Like her, we must hold out our hands to the poor, and open our arms to the needy.

Sometimes this will involve taking risks – even spiritual risks. Do remember what St Augustine famously said when he was made a bishop?

Thirty-Third Sunday of the Year (A)

Whenever I am terrified by what I am *for* you, I am given comfort by what I am *with* you. *For* you I am a bishop, but *with* you I am, after all, a Christian. The former signifies an office undertaken, the latter, grace; the former is a name for danger, the latter a name for salvation.

Finally, as if on the open sea, I am being tossed about by the stormy activity involved in being a bishop; but as I recall by whose blood I have been redeemed, I enter a safe harbour in the tranquil recollection of being a Christian.

The same may surely be said of any responsibility we take on. Consider the awesome responsibility for the life of another that a parent bears, for example. If we really considered how precious is the treasure of a child – one, or two, or five, like the talents in the Gospel – we could be terrified. Like Augustine, we can only enter a safe harbour in the tranquil recollection of being a Christian.

For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

In short, to make the most of the time of our life here on earth, it is not enough just to avoid doing harm, we must strive also to do the good that we can – and we must not be terrified by the awesome responsibility of wielding a free will.

Without God, of course, we can do nothing, but in the words of a reflection attributed to St Theresa of Avila,

*Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

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15 November 2020  
St Dominic's, Camberwell