

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A



FIRST READING
Proverbs 31:10–13, 19–20,
30–31

PSALM
Psalm 128:1–5

SECOND READING
1 Thessalonians 5:1–6

GOSPEL
Matthew 25:14–30

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PRAYER

Psalm 128:1–5

Happy is everyone
who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways.
You shall eat the fruit
of the labor of your hands;
you shall be happy,
and it shall go well with you.
Your wife will be like
a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like
olive shoots
around your table.
Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.
The Lord bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity
of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Proverbs 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31

A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious
than jewels.
The heart of her husband
trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands
to the needy.
Charm is deceitful,
and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord
is to be praised.
Give her a share
in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works
praise her in the city gates.

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:1–6

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

Gospel

Matthew 25:14–30

Jesus said, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you

have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

HEARING THE WORD

"Develop!"

Today's liturgy builds on the theme of the previous Sunday, "prepare", with a more detailed explanation regarding what preparation for the encounter with the coming Lord should include.

The first reading comes from the book of Proverbs, which, like the book of Wisdom we read from last Sunday, instructs on how to live wisely. "Lady Wisdom" appears in both books as God's own companion who instructs the faithful in the art of living well. However, the book of Proverbs, contains yet another character

who illustrates the ways of Lady Wisdom – a "capable" or perfect wife. The book closes with a poem dedicated to this woman described as exemplary and so precious as to surpass in value all the riches of the world. This perfect woman is capable of maintaining her household in perfect order, as is symbolically portrayed by her skill in cloth-making – "she seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands." Her influence extends also to the broader community where she engages in charity – "she opens her hand to the poor". Her exemplary life illustrates the attitude which wisdom literature calls "fear of the Lord". This attitude has nothing to do with being afraid or apprehensive. It is a Hebrew expression that describes the attitude of respectful reverence and pious obedience to God's commands. To be wise means to fear the Lord, as is stated in the famous phrase: "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10).

Therefore, the perfect wife in today's readings illustrates how the life of "fearing of the Lord", should be lived; it implies harmony on the domestic and communal levels achieved by the conscientious fulfilment of one's duties. In wisdom literature, Lady Wisdom represents God's design for human life. In the book of Proverbs, the perfect wife embodies Lady Wisdom in real life.

In the second reading we reach the closing section of 1 Thessalonians. Following his strong statements about the parousia, which we studied last Sunday, Paul indicates the conse-

quences of his teaching for the day-to-day life of his believers. He begins by emphasising that the timing of parousia is completely unknown. Using the image of "thief in the night" (cf. Matt 24:43; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 16:15), Paul indicates that Christ will return unexpectedly and at the least expected time. Since this is the case, Christians have to live in the state of constant readiness and "sobriety". He explains that being "sober" means staying away from dissolute and unreflective living "in the night", and practicing the virtues of faith, love and hope (1 Thess 5:7-8). Thus, to prepare for the parousia, one should orient his or her life towards the practice of vibrant religious life (faith), active charity (love) with a focus on life's ultimate goal – salvation (hope).

The parable of the talents is one of the best-known stories in the NT. Last Sunday's parable of the ten bridesmaids taught about the need to prepare adequately for the encounter with Jesus at the end of time. Today's parable is meant to reveal what such preparation entails. The story is about three slaves, or servants, who have been entrusted with huge amount of wealth. The word "talent", at the time of Jesus, referred to the sum of about 6000 denarii, which was the equivalent to the pay for six thousand days of work. An ordinary person would have to work every single day for approximately 16 years to earn one talent. The servants were given these huge amounts in a different measure in accordance with their abilities, which demonstrates the

master's prudence and consideration. Importantly, they were not told what to do, but rather given freedom to show initiative and use the wealth as they wished.

After returning from the journey, the master called his servants to account for what each had received. The first two decided to put the riches to the maximum use, developing and multiplying what they were given. However, the third servant chose a different approach; he did nothing with his "talent". He then attempted to justify his inaction by pointing to the demanding character of the master and his own fears. In effect, he blamed the master for his own failure. Ironically, making these excuses he condemned himself by indicating that he well knew his master's exacting and demanding character. Thus, the servant knew very well that hiding his talent was never an option and doing so would land him in trouble with the master who expected initiative and results. Yet, he did not act on this knowledge. Rather he chose look for excuses for doing nothing, trying to outsmart his master. Because he consciously wasted his gift and tried to make it look as somebody else's fault, the master denounced him as a wicked and lazy servant.

Another important lesson is contained in the statement, "to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away". These words are drawn from Proverbs 9:9 and indicates that those who are faithful in their tasks will reap even greater benefits, while those who do nothing with their talents will lose even that which they were initially given.

The example of the wicked servant perfectly illustrates that principle at work.

Through this parable Jesus teaches that a person must prepare for the end of life and judgment by using the abilities at his or her disposal and developing them in the greatest measure possible. Working with what one has been given will lead to growth, while inaction and wastefulness of one's talents will lead to their inevitable loss, both in this life and in the next.

According to this Sunday's readings, preparation for the parousia involves conscientious application of one's talents and abilities throughout life on the earth. Like the perfect wife from Proverbs, Christians are to live in the attitude of the "fear of the Lord", which implies working for domestic and societal harmony according to God's commandments. Paul further enhanced this teaching by pointing to the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love as ways to live a sober and reflective life in view of the approaching parousia. Finally, Jesus reveals that all people have been given abilities, gifts and talents of different types and in different measure. However, all are bound to develop and use them to grow and mature for their own sake, and for others. Passivity, laziness and indifference to these gifts leads to failure to develop oneself, and will bring God's wrath. Thus, while waiting for the parousia, Christians have to be actively engaged in developing themselves and the world around them, so that, in the end, they may be called "good and trustworthy servants", because, truthfully the psalmist states that,

"Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

"Develop" and "development" are popular words today. The world is divided into "developing" and "developed" nations. There are multiple criteria used to place a country into either category. These include economy, political situation, level of technological advancement and standard of living. Our continent is classified as "developing", which has both positive and negative connotations. Positive, in the sense that there is recognition of the great potential that the continent and its people have for growth and development. Negative, in the sense that Africa is unfairly compared with other continents which have had a very different history and possibilities. Nonetheless, the word "developing" is, in its essence, very positive because it reveals aspirations and desire for growth and a willingness for hard work which is necessary for development. Africa has both the potential and capacity for development. What is needed from its inhabitants is the willingness to do what its development requires.

Every good educational system is committed to developing learners through helping them to discover their talents, make good career choices related to their areas of strength and become valuable and contributing members of the society. There are numerous motivational speakers around who encourage people to develop their

talents and follow their dreams. One cannot go to a bookstore or listen to the radio without encountering someone who is giving advice on how to develop one's talents, persevere through hardships, believe in oneself and never give up. Priest and preachers, using faith and scripture, exhort believers to develop and grow in their knowledge of God and the practice of charity in order to mature as human beings. All these teachers and mentors know and recognize that development and self-betterment are at the very core of our nature. They all also share the undeniable conviction that true development requires one's own efforts, perseverance and commitment.

However, there is also a tendency in us to seek success and advancement by-passing the efforts which true development requires. For example, in our culture there are some beliefs that falsely indicate that there are certain short cuts to instant progress, development and success. One of the recent and most tragic examples of looking for such shortcuts is the killing of albino persons because of the belief that their body parts are "good luck" charms that enable people to get rich quickly. Recently there was a newspaper article about a pastor selling pens that would ensure a high pass rate for students without them doing any study! There are many who claim to be prophets and offer quick fixes for promotion and financial prosperity without going through the normal process of skills development, patient planning and hard work. Some

preachers encourage the giving of tithes as a guarantee of blessings, promotion and prosperity. All these are false and harmful beliefs that can be likened to that of the servant who refuses to do what is required, who instead hides his talent, just trying to get by in life by clever maneuverings. As it is, God gave us talents which have to be developed and used, this being the only way to truly grow and fulfill life's purpose.

Our talents are not only for our personal benefit but also for the good of the community, for uplifting others and helping countries become more prosperous leading to greater growth for the entire continent. Working for the common good is an essential part of our presence in the world. If we think of it that way, we will be better able to find solutions for the many challenges and obstacle that development in Africa faces. When we combine the development of our talents with our faith, then we can truly be assured of being reliable and trustworthy servants who are doing the will of their master while awaiting his return.

PROVERB

*"Tomorrow belongs
to the people
who prepare for it
today."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What are your talents and how are you developing these?

Have you faced the temptation to pursue shortcuts to success? What have been the consequences and what lessons have you learnt?

Response to God:

Give thanks to God for your talents and ask for ways in which you can develop them for your own good and that of the world around you.

Response to your World:

Go back to the list of your talents and for each one write down one step that you could take to use your talent to serve your local parish and community.

PRAYER

*Take my life,
and let it be consecrated, Lord,
to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
let them flow
in ceaseless praise.
Take my silver and my gold,
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect
and use every power
as you choose.
Amen.*

Adopted from the hymn
'Take my life and let it be'
by F. Havergal