

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon and is the oldest collection of inspired texts in the body of Wisdom literature. The book takes its name from the Hebrew word *masal* which means “a provocative saying;” a saying which gets the listener’s attention. In the early stages, these sayings were short in form – later they began to take the form of a parable or allegory. Being short and succinct, it was easy to remember and thus useful in oral teaching; in fact, parents used them for teaching their children.

The date of composition of the book of Proverbs is unclear. The introduction (chapters 1 through 9) appears to have been written last; perhaps around the fifth century B.C. (after the exile) but chapters 10 through 29 can be dated well before the exile. It is uncertain when chapters 30 and 31 might have been written.

Our first reading today praises the virtues of a good wife, painting a picture of the ideal woman who is lacking nothing in terms of perfection and integrity. With the qualities described and God’s grace she can face the future with optimism, knowing that God will watch over her and hers because she is so good. Obviously, if mothers are faithful to these virtues, society is going to have a good base. If we were to read each of the verses 10 through 31 instead of only a few, we would find a unique literary style – each of the twenty-two verses begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet; another mnemonic device which allows for easy memory in oral recitation and teaching.

¹⁰ When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls.

This emphasizes the incomparable value of this woman. Wisdom is often compared to jewels in the Proverbs (3:15; 8:11; 16:16; 20:15).

¹¹ Her husband, entrusting his heart to her, has an unfailing prize. ¹² She brings him good, and not evil, all the days of her life.

The wife’s value to her husband is like wisdom’s value to its followers (Proverbs 3:13-18; 4:6, 8-9).

¹³ She obtains wool and flax and makes cloth with loving hands.

With skillful hands... She is industrious.

¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff, and her fingers ply the spindle. ²⁰ She reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy.

Not only is she industrious, she is compassionate and charitable.

³⁰ Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting; the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

This is the only explicitly religious element in the entire poem. As is stated in Proverbs 1:7 “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

³¹ Give her a reward of her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Today we finish our study of Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. Recall that this letter has been occasioned by questions which the Thessalonians have concerning the end times: will anyone have an advantage or disadvantage by having died before the parousia, and when will the parousia come?

Remember also that in last week’s reading Saint Paul answers the first question – no one will have an advantage as all will meet Jesus in their resurrected body at the same time. Saint Paul now goes on to discuss the second question, the timing of the parousia.

^{5:1} Concerning times and seasons, brothers, you have no need for anything to be written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord

This is a Biblical image taken from prophetic tradition (Amos 5:18; Joel 2:1; Zephaniah 1:7). The traditional nature of the “day of the Lord” implies that the Lord is God (Yahweh). To further identify this day with Jesus Saint Paul writes in Philippians 1:6 “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

will come like a thief at night.

This imagery emphasizes the suddenness of the event rather than the timing.

³ When people are saying, "Peace and security," then sudden disaster comes upon them,

The great threat to vigilance is complacency and false prophets of continued prosperity.

like labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you, brothers, are not in darkness, for that day to overtake you like a thief.

In contrast to the complacency just described, the inevitability of the event is compared to the onset of labor for a pregnant woman – we know it is coming, but not when labor will start.

“Therefore, not to know the times is something different from decay of morals and love of vice. For, when the apostle Paul said, ‘Don’t allow your thinking to be shaken nor be frightened, neither by word nor by epistle as sent from us, as if the day of the Lord were at hand (2 Thessalonians 2:2),’ he obviously did not want them to believe those who thought the coming of the Lord was already at hand, but neither did he want them to be like the wicked servant and say, ‘My Lord is long in coming,’ and deliver themselves over to destruction by pride and riotous behavior. Thus, his desire that they should not listen to false rumors about the imminent approach of the last day was consistent with his wish that they should await the coming of their Lord fully prepared, packed for travel and with lamps burning (see Luke 12:35-36). He said to them, ‘But you, brothers, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you as a thief, for all you are children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness.’” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 418), *Letters* 199,1,2]

⁵ For all of you are children of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness.

Christians are united to Christ, the light of the world. We are no longer subject to the assaults of darkness. In Judaism, light and darkness are seen as two opposing kingdoms; one good and the other evil.

⁶ Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober.

This does not say that one should not sleep or take a drink, it is a reminder that we must at all times be vigilant as there won’t be time to prepare.

Gospel - Matthew 25:14-30

Last week we heard the parable of the wise and foolish virgins; a reminder to us all to live out our faith every day so that we will be prepared for the day of the Lord; the day when we are admitted to the heavenly banquet. Today we hear the parable of the talents. A talent wasn’t just any old coin, it had a value of about 100 pounds of silver. In this parable the main message is the need to respond to grace by making a genuine effort right through one’s life. All the gifts of nature and grace which God has given us should yield a profit. It does not matter how many gifts we have received, what matters is our generosity in putting them to good use. A person’s Christian calling should not lie hidden and barren; it should be outgoing, apostolic, and self-sacrificing.

[Jesus told his disciples this parable:] ¹⁴ “It will be as when a man who was going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one--to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The word play is evident here as the monetary term “talents” contrasts with the man’s

abilities: his talents – his gifts, aptitudes, flairs. Although each has different talents, each man is given a portion to care for. This can be seen as God's grace – everyone has a different size cup, but all are filled.

Immediately ¹⁶ the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. ¹⁷ Likewise, the one who received two made another two. ¹⁸ But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

Hid his light, guarded his gifts but did not use them.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

This hints at the delay of the parousia and the settling of accounts at the last judgement (the general judgement).

²⁰ The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

He engaged in trustworthy risk-taking. He maintained his faith and understanding through whatever trials he had encountered.

Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities.

The reward of fidelity is a commission of even greater responsibility.

Come, share your master's joy.'

The kingdom of God

²² (Then) the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

Notice that even though the initial charge was less (two vs. five) the reward is the same.

²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; ²⁵ so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.'

The point of this whole parable is that the owner is demanding. This man has lost nothing, but he has gained nothing either.

²⁶ His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Should you not then have put

my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return?

This seems to favor moderate capitalism.

²⁸ Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. ²⁹ For 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.

The powers conferred on Christians grow with use and wither with disuse.

³⁰ And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'

The punishment is the same as that given the man without the proper wedding garment (last week's gospel reading). He is cast out and is not admitted to the wedding banquet. The punishment for infidelity through neglect is the same as the punishment for lack of repentance. We are all given talents and God expects us to use whatever ones we have for the benefit of others.

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