

The 33rd Sunday of Year A: We all have talent(s) – but for what?

1st Reading: Proverbs 31 (various verses) What makes for a perfect wife?

2nd Reading: 1 Thess. 5:1-6: Be prepared! The Lord may come quickly.

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30: The talents (A very short form is often used.).

How do you react when you come across a clever villain? Do you feel that you have to admire his/her skills (while not approving of the wickedness) – or does the waste of such potential for doing good actually sadden you? I suspect that (if we're honest) it's mixture of the two. It is a year before the USA presidential election, but people are already studying the candidates' perceived faults: showmanship versus senility, with both having a 'dodgy' financial past. I shall not pass any more comment! However, a basic point remains: most have a 'talent' for something. The questions are: what is it, and how do we develop it?

Of course, the word "talent" originally meant a huge sum of money (like our national debt?), so the context of Jesus' parable is how people use what they have been entrusted with – a vast sum of money. Modern writers tend to apply the parable to the development of personality, or the use of abilities, time and opportunities, etc. Jesus does not specify – the main stress is on the trust the rich man placed in his servants, and the way they responded (or did not respond) to that trust. If you read the parable (Matthew 25:14-30) in a missal, you'll find that the short form is confined to a man with 5 talents making 5 more, and everyone ending up happy. The full version is more sombre: People get 5, or 2 or 1 talent(s) according to their ability; the man with the one talent buried it, returned it to the master (safe & sound) but was then punished for his laziness. Given Jesus' attitude to materialism, I suspect that the early Church intended the parable to have a spiritual application, even though the parable has a further cash reward going to the man who already had 10 talents (the 5 originals + the 5 extra that he had made). Some American Evangelicals do take the cash interpretation literally: they argue that true love of God leads to real financial rewards in this life. Few European Christians would agree with that.

At first sight, the opening reading (Proverbs 31, various verses) seems destined to infuriate feminists and puzzle everyone else....until you read it carefully. I admit that using language like "perfect wife" sounds like something from a 1950's *Ideal Home Exhibition*. But if we read on, we see that this "wife" attracts confidence, as she is highly proficient in the skills of those times. Successful herself, she cares for the poor. She is wise, and for that, she deserves much praise. What we are talking about here is a well-developed personality. This suggests that the idea of 'personality' is how we interpret Jesus' parable.

Those of us who have worked with young people (in my case, as a priest-teacher in the 1970's & 1980's) understand the need to develop their skills and "talents" – whatever they may be. Some years ago, Ofsted (the government school inspection body) put the stress of its inspections on to the improvement that a school achieves in the students as they go through that school. This matches both this weekend's gospel, and the basic RC teaching on educating the individual child. It also marks a major change from the beliefs of some in state education in the 1960-80's. They argued that almost any academic distinction or separation between children in a class or year-group was wrong – despite the bad effects this policy clearly had on the more able children, and on those with special needs. Schools cannot live their pupils' lives for them, but they are morally bound to give them the tools to achieve the best they can.

As a balance to that, in the 2nd reading Paul warns that we should not be too 'worldly' in our attitude to life. This is a standard theme in the Church's readings in these dark & damp days of November! For Paul, there is more to life than merely material success. Christians should be aware of this, and adjust their lives accordingly. I know that many readers rightly worry about the cost of living, how to afford family Christmas presents, the risk of the wars in Ukraine & Gaza spreading, etc. However, this is where we need a spiritual approach – prayer. I do not mean that prayer 'magics away' problems, but it can offer a perspective on life that is different from society's mainly materialist answers.

Where does all this leave us? I think it is pointless worrying too much whether we have five / two / one talent(s) as in the gospel parable. We all have emotions, ideas, intellect, personal traits, etc. God wants each of us to develop & use these in our relations with others - and (keeping the 2nd reading in mind) with Him. I think this is where the religious and the human intertwine: developing our skills and personality makes us both happier and holier – at least, it should. This goes back to that old Catholic belief that 'Grace builds on nature'; in other words, we are human before we are Christian, and we cannot separate the human from the divine in our make-up. I have met too many people who have either suppressed human development in favour of making people 'holy', or who have seen no place for religion in human progress. Both extremes spoil life, and (as usual) the truth lies somewhere in the middle. I suggest that these readings offer that happy medium. *Fr Jim Dunne.*