

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Wisdom 18:6-9 / Luke 12:32-48)
11.08.2019
The Master, the Servant & the Thief

The master, the servant and the thief.

These are the 3 main characters of our Gospel reading today. They are guest stars in many of Jesus' parables. There are good and bad masters and good and bad servants. Yet when there is a thief, the cast is always the same: Jesus is the master, the king, the householder; we are the servants, the stewards; and the devil is the bad guy, the burglar, the thief.

Yet there may be another way to cast the parts. When we look at Jesus, we discover that he became a servant for us (cf. Phil 2:7) and in so doing he typified what a master must be. So we can say that because we are called to be servants we are supposed to be masters. Because we are servants of the Lord – only when we are his servants – are we free and masters. The point is not that in being servants we expect to be rewarded by becoming masters. No, in serving, we reveal what true Christian mastery is all about. While he meditates on our poverty the psalmist can also marvel at the fact that God has crowned us with glory and honour (cf. Ps 8:5).

St John Paul II sums up the reasoning with the following words: "If 'being a king' is truly possible only by 'being a servant', then 'being a servant' also demands so much spiritual maturity that it must really be described as 'being a king'." (*Redemptor Hominis* n. 21)

It is important to be reminded that, in our Christian communities, service is the measuring rod of all power, authority, or exaltation. Whatever the responsibilities we are asked to exercise, whatever status we are given, at the core of our Christian identity is service. In the Church we are all servants.

This explains why the most beautiful title of the Pope is "Servant of the servants of God". This explains also why careerism is, according to Pope Francis, "incompatible with Christian discipleship" (*Hom.* 18.10.2015).

Careerism is not a minor problem in the Church, it poisons what is at the core of the Christian calling, it "is a form of leprosy" (*Address*, 06.06.2013), in total opposition with Jesus' words: "I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:27).

Bishops, priests, lay people, consecrated men and women are all enlisted in the school of the Lord's service (cf. RB Prol. 45) where all learn to serve the Lord in serving one another, in serving the Lord in one another.

The master, the servant and the thief. So in the cast, we are servants and masters.

What about the thief or the bad servant?

Here I think that we need to go back to the definition of sin given by Rabbi Abraham Heschel: "The greatest sin of man is to forget that he is a prince." (*God in Search...*, p. 417)

The thief is the one who robs us of our true identity as members of the royal family of God. The bad servant is the one who makes us act in a way which is not respectful of our deeper status as brothers and sisters of Christ.

We have to remember Jesus' words: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." (Mt 15:18-20)

The thief, the bad steward is not somebody outside of us at whom we can point the finger. Within us there are many voices which speak to our hearts and minds; among them some are voices of self-centredness and greed. These voices tell us that we have to put ourselves first before everybody else, as persons or as a country. They are voices of self-sufficiency. They speak words of rejection and condemnation of all those who disagree with us or challenge us. I dare to say that these voices speak particularly loudly at the moment through some of our political leaders in the United Kingdom or in the United States of America.

We all need to make our own St Augustine's prayer: "O Truth, illumination of my heart, let not my own darkness speak to me!" (*Confessions*, XII:10.10)

The voice of the thief, or bad servant within us prevents us from serving and so from being faithful to the gentle voice of the Lord which invites us to be like him.

At the end of the 60s, there was a famous Italian western film, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. While in the film, we have three men engaged in the same quest, in the parables, with the master, the servant and the thief, each one of us is the only character on stage, responsible for the voice he or she chooses to listen to and follow.

All the voices will promise us joy and happiness, only one will deliver them. As we grapple with the discordant and enticing voices which surround us, our Gospel reading mentions two qualities which can help us: faithfulness and attentiveness.

The good servant and the good master are faithful people, faithful to God and faithful to their own dignity as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. The desire to remain faithful should attune our ears to the voice of the Lord, the life-giving voice of the Master whose yoke is easy and burden light (cf. Mt 11:30).

Aware that in our faithfulness lies our strength, we can become really attentive to the Lord's call to be truly ourselves, servants and masters, servants because masters.