

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Proverbs 31:10-13.19-20.30.31 / Matthew 25:14-30)
15.11.2020
Faithfulness to Life

The parable we just heard is quite black and white: the master praises and rewards the two servants who increased their amount of money and he rejects the servant who did nothing with the money given him. This could be a good story-line for an investment company's advertising campaign!

For us the question is why is there such a difference of treatment between the first two servants and the third?

According to the master, the first two servants were "faithful". Faithful to what? St Matthew does not tell us that the servants were given any particular instruction regarding the handling of the money given to them. So to what were the first two servants faithful?

And if we consider the third servant: why is he accused of being evil? He may be a lazy man but does that make him an evil man?

In order to answer these questions we must begin by highlighting the fact that this parable, like many others in the Gospels, is meant to describe what the Kingdom of heaven is about. All the parables about seeds, trees, vineyards and harvests show us that the deep nature of the Kingdom of heaven is about growth and life-bearing fruit. In our parable today we have the same idea – the talents are a gift that needs to grow – with emphasis placed upon the fact that we have an important part to play in the establishment of the Kingdom on earth. God is certainly responsible for the harvest, he is the master and we are the workers. The words of St Paul to the Corinthians describe the process very succinctly: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1Co 3:6) It appears clearly that God's plan for his Kingdom in our midst is essentially about life and renewal.

So now we understand why the master praised the first two servants: they were faithful to a mission that does not need to be spelt out because it is what we were made for: to be alive and to promote life. In the creation story, the first order that God gave to trees, plants and humankind was: "Be fruitful and increase" (Gn 1:22.28). More talents means more life, it is like the seed which "produces a crop yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (Mt 13:23)

The third servant, when he hid his talent in the ground, quite literally buried it and thereby killed any prospect of life. An oriental monk from the 6th century considered that laziness "weaves the dark shroud enveloping the soul in murk" (*The Philokalia*, vol. I, p. 159). The lazy servant became unable to see what was really at stake in the gift of his master. His fears blinded him and smothered life within him.

For you and me, fidelity is first and foremost fidelity to life. Faithfulness to the Christian message has nothing to do with a return to the past or with a stubborn attachment to secondary or even outdated ways of thinking or worshipping, it is a dynamic reality. The Latin phrase *Semper fidelis* which literally means *Always faithful* in fact, for us Christians, commands us to be faithful to Christ's mission as he himself expresses it: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (Jn 10:10)

Faithfulness calls us to a respectful and active participation in all that is life-giving. We are workers in the field called to keep an eye on the crop so that it bears its fruit at the right time; we are midwives called to help one another to come to life.

All this requires of us attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit, the ability to discern what is really important, the willingness to let go of the old and to welcome what is new. The lazy servant failed on all counts.

Maybe we better understand the meaning of Jesus' words: "The man who has not, even what he has will be taken away." At first we may find this statement a bit harsh and unfair.

Yet the point is that if, as a gardener, I have a seed which I do not make blossom, not only do I not have the fruits of the seed but ultimately the seed will die, so at the end everything will be taken away from me.

We all long to hear the Lord's words: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Mt 25:21)

Our parable today tells us what it means to be faithful servants in the small things of our lives. Faithfulness is as much about the past as it is about the future. In one of his poems Tennyson looks back at the year which has just ended and praises the one which is beginning, a year pregnant with all that is going to happen. In it he longs to see "the Christ that is to be" (*In Memoriam*). We have to be open to what is to come, to Christ who is coming, always new and always challenging. In order to remain faithful to our identity and our mission we must continually make an effort to be creatively inventive (cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Presence...*, p. 12); like the first two servants, we must be ready to take risks and to produce new talents, new fruits. Out of fear, laziness or selfishness, as Christians, we cannot close the present to the future, and like the third servant, deprive ourselves, the Church and the world, of the life that is to be.

We are not supposed to keep our faith in a freezer, sterile and untouched or in a safe just for the sake of safety. The Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminded us that "Christians do not have a point of view to defend, but a way they must travel." A way we must travel... for each one of us there is a way to travel, a journey to accomplish, a task to undertake.

Just as in our parable where the servants receive different amounts of talents, we all have a personal journey to travel, a journey that nobody else can make for us. What we have in common is a call to be alive and life-giving.

At the end of a year which has been taxing for everybody and horrendous for many, it is our particular responsibility, as Christians, to bear witness to the God of life and hope in the world. We are called to work faithfully and actively, wherever we are, so that the Spirit which has been given to us (cf. Rm 5:5) may bear his fruits of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23) in our hearts, in our communities and throughout the world.