

The 24th Sun after Pentecost, Proper 28

“Preparing for the Return of Christ”

Judges 4:1-7; Ps 123; 1 Thess 5:1-11; Mt 25:14-30

Matthew’s gospel continues to build upon the theme of constant watchfulness, preparedness, and, in today’s passage, waiting productively. Matthew emphasizes that during this time of “productive” waiting, the Christian community is to avoid laziness and fear and to take the risks that frequently accompany growth. Rather than just living “safely,” we are to use the gifts we have been given in ways that reflect the creativity and commitment of our Creator God. We are called to be good stewards of the Gospel by proclaiming the Good News and not by hiding it away; for our reward is the everlasting joy of God’s Kingdom.

We often forget that the early Christian community lived in hope of the imminent return of the Lord, of Christ returning in power and glory at any moment. Thus, when the Apostle Paul wrote to his beloved community in Thessalonica, Paul warned that the “Day of the Lord” was going to come unexpectedly to an unprepared world, “*like a thief in the night*” [1Thess 5:2]. Thus, any attempt to predict the exact day or time was futile. Like the ancient prophets, Paul also saw sudden destruction for those who took no account of God’s will.

However, Paul’s letter was primarily speaking words of comfort for his converts who he calls: “*the children of light and children of the day*” [v5]. As God’s chosen, they were to act in accord with that divine privilege by taking up the responsibilities of their calling; they were to stay awake and to be sober in their habits—things that remain applicable even for us today. In contrast, those who had not committed themselves to the fellowship of the disciples were compared to those who “*sleep in darkness and become drunk in the night*” [7]. For them, the “Day of the Lord” might indeed come *as a thief* to rob them of the well-being they believed was theirs. Paul then encouraged the Thessalonians to remain alert, for they were destined by God for salvation and not for wrath. Furthermore, Paul said that the best way for them to prepare themselves was by putting on the “*Armor of God*”—in other words, by using their talents to encourage one another to remain steadfast and by living with faith and love in the hope of salvation.

Within this backdrop we Christians thus find ourselves wrestling with the challenges of watchfulness, preparedness, and (given today’s gospel) divine productivity. For God’s call, which we are to follow in whatever ways we are gifted to do and in whatever areas of service we are inclined, urges us to the courage and risk of moving forward. For however we may stress the Divine mercy that overcomes our human failings, any neglect of the endowments that God has bestowed upon us will sooner or later be lamented and regretted. For even God takes the “risk” of reaching out to us in love—in an act of giving which cost the Father the life of his Beloved Son.

There is a story I once read that I believe reflects upon today’s gospel passage about the “talents” and it goes something like this.¹ One time a miser hid his gold at the foot of a tree in his garden. Every week he would dig it up and look at it for hours on end. One day, a thief came and dug up the gold and took it away. When the miser next came to look upon his treasure, all he found was an empty hole. The miser howled with grief so loudly that all of his neighbors came to discover what the trouble was. When they found out, one of the neighbors asked, “Did you use any of the gold?” “No,” said the miser, “I only looked at it every week.” “Well then,” said the neighbor, “for all the good the gold did you, you might just as well come every week and gaze upon the hole!”

¹ de Mello, Anthony, SJ; *The Heart of the Enlightened*; 1989

This story is a sad commentary on those who are unwilling to take risks with the resources God has given them. Like the third servant in the parable who hid his talent, the miser also failed to put his treasure to work. Instead, the miser hid his treasure and kept it for his own enjoyment. In Jesus' parable, the master was not pleased and consequently took away the talent that had been given to the third servant. Even worse, the man was then "*thrown into the outer darkness*" [v30] because the servant's behavior did not measure up to the master's standards. Likewise, the miser in our story not only "lost" his treasure, he wasted it, thus one might say that his inconsolable grief became his reward.

The fact is that God gives all of us various "resources." To some, God gives special "talents." To others, God gives wealth and abundance. Every one of us receives something from God. For those who are not blessed with any apparent special talents or resources, God still always gives "grace." The point is that we all have the love of God within us and God wants us, all of us, to risk it all to, at the very least, to give that love away.

"Our eyes look to the LORD our God, from whom we seek mercy." Ps 123:3

What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today's readings?

1. The "Master" entrusted property/various amounts of money to his different servants.
 - a. Which of the servants in Jesus' parable of the "Talents" do you think you are?
 - b. How do you think that *you* would have responded with the "Master's Money"?
2. Why do you think the "Master" said: "*You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter.*" [Mt 25:26]
 - a. What comes before the Master's statement?
 - b. What "tone of voice" might have been intended by the Master?
 - c. How might tone of voice change the meaning of that statement?
3. Jesus opened this parable with: "*The Kingdom of Heaven will be as when a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves/servants and entrusted his property to them...*" [Mt 25:14]
 - a. How does that sentence describe "The Kingdom of Heaven" for you?
4. We believe that, in addition to the grace God has given to each of us in our baptism, that God dispenses many "talents" to his people.
 - a. What "talents" do you think God has given you?
 - b. What do you need to help you use your "talents" in the world?

For the Biblical Scholars

In today's Epistle, Paul refers to "*a breastplate of faith and love, & a helmet of salvation.*" [1 Thess 5:8] Paul is using a reference found in the Old Testament.

- Where can this reference be found?
- What does that reference refer to in the Old Testament?
- What impact does that reference have on Paul's message to the Thessalonians?