

Second before Advent (Remembrance), Year A GFS Service

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

It's tempting to hear the parable of the talents as if it was about what we call talents: music, art, craftsmanship and so on. And if we do, the message might be that we are called to nurture those talents, and to share them with the world. That is, to make the most of them, and let them flower to make the world a better, richer and more delightful place. You would think that that would be a reasonable message to take into our daily lives—that we should make the most of what we have been given. I suppose what makes that interpretation rather unlikely is what happens to the most timid of the three servants: he is condemned. Maybe there is another way of looking at it. It's as well to know that in the language of Holy Scripture, for those people at that time, a talent was an enormous sum of money. Jesus doubtless knows that talking about money is a sure way to get people's attention. Maybe the problem with the third servant, the one who buries the talents in the ground, is that he does what he thinks is best. The other two do what their master asks them to do. Maybe the problem with the third servant is that he allowed his fear and timidity to over-rule his master's voice.

There may be in your own lives things you know you have to do, but you put off doing because you are afraid. Maybe you don't want to confront some particular issue. Maybe you are fearful of having to talk to someone you think might be hostile. Think, perhaps, of the tax return. You just have to make yourself do it—you know you can't escape, but you put it off again and again. And then the penalty for a late return. We all have moments like this. And when we confront the issue early, the outcome is better than we expect. Sometimes we need to accept that avoiding conflict is not good. Sometimes we have to let go of what we think is pleasant, in order to hear the master's voice within. Some of you might be old enough to have heard of Albert Schweitzer, a man of great gifts – musician, theologian, medical doctor, who could have had a glittering career in any one of these, but instead felt himself pulled to renouncing glamour and instead setting up a hospital in remote Africa. Someone who listened to that voice within that was calling him to give his talents in an entirely unexpected way. Maybe, the talents parable is about obedience to the Lord's will, about listening to that inner voice that we ignore because of fear and timidity.

Problems of procrastination seem to be a feature of the first reading too. This letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest part of all the New Testament to be written, only 20 years or so after Jesus' death, and Paul is telling his readers that when the Lord comes, it will be like a thief in the night—that is, unpredictable and without warning—so be ready now because you never know the time and place (same as the wise and foolish virgins).

For those who lost their lives as a result of fighting, or of trying to prevent fighting, death did indeed come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. We remember those people today - those who did what they were asked to do. They did not give in to fear. In the last 50 years women and men have died in the Balkans, Cyprus, Middle East, Egypt, Africa, and of course here at home. Irish men and women have joined the US and UK military forces and have served in the conflicts of those nations. Whether or not we have been involved in armed conflict, it's not difficult to appreciate the nastiness of war. We choose to sanitise war by thinking of the dead. We don't have to provide medical care for the dead like we do for the maimed. We don't have to worry about the lacerations, the amputations, the psychological effects that remain with survivors and their families. So let's remember too the bereaved, the mothers, fathers, lovers, friends; those who were not killed but maimed. Let's remember those countless stories of real human tragedy.

We live in a culture that encourages us to think that only what "I" want matters. It is all very *me, me, me*. This is pernicious nonsense. Time and again, scripture tells us that what matters is not what "I" want, but what is good for the community. That is what political service should be about—not egoism and nest-feathering, but rather the service to the common good. Maybe the message of the parable of the talents is that the one who gave in to fear and timidity was condemned, the ones who did as their master expected were rewarded. And what does the Lord expect? To do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. To love God, and neighbour as ourselves.

The GFS is a society that nurtures people in the knowledge of the common good. In it, you learn that what you might want as an individual is not as important as what is good for the group. You will see that being timid and settling for second best is not good enough. You are learning that sometimes you have to set aside me, me, me and remember us, us, us – and the us is not just about the GFS in Portlaoise, not just the people in Ireland, or Europe, but about the whole world. Settling for second best and an easy life will not do. That's the message of the parable of the talents. The service of the common good is what all those who have died in conflict were doing, whether they knew it or not. It was not the easy option. That is what the injured, the maimed and the grieving are doing. Theirs is not the easy option. That is why those who grieve their loss can in the midst of their grief be proud.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old; age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.