Homily – 33rd Sunday in Ord Time (A)

*Prov. 31, 1 Thess. 5: 1-6 & Mt. 25: 14-30*

In a sense, this is the last Ordinary Sunday we will celebrate until next January, after the close of the Christmas Season. Next week, we keep the Solemnity of Christ the King, and the following Sunday, we begin the new liturgical year with the 1st Sunday of Advent. As always, the readings at this time of year focus more and more clearly each week on the theme of judgment and entry into the Kingdom. Because this is Yr. A, we have been reading from the great “parables of the Kingdom” in the last chapter of Matthew’s story before he begins his Passion Narrative – last week the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, this week the parable of the talents, and next week – “spoiler alert” – the great parable of the sheep and the goats.

There is little mistaking Jesus’ meaning when he gives the familiar parable in today’s Gospel. Each servant is entrusted with a huge sum of his master’s money, each according to his ability. Even the least able – the man given the single talent – is dealing with a substantial quantity of cash; the best guess which Mr Wikipedia could come up with when I checked is that a biblical talent would today be worth $1.25 million – just short of £1,000,000. The two first servants work hard and double their master’s investment, and are praised by him on his return. The third servant, though, simply buries the money – it must have been a pretty large hole! – producing no return, not even interest, and is roundly condemned by his master as “good-for-nothing” and cast out of the household. The message is clear. I suppose a modern summary would be “use it, or lose it”.

We see something of the same idea in that first reading from the Book of Proverbs. It undoubtedly sounds rather dated now, indeed, possibly even a little sexist to the modern ear. Actually, however, the reading we heard is only a selection of verses from a much longer passage – and the fuller version really is worth reading. Clearly, the author is describing an incredibly talented and astute woman – one who runs her own businesses, deals shrewdly in the markets, but is also renowned for her wisdom and her generosity. She is a woman, thus, who is praised for her *own* talents, not for who she is married to, praised for the way she uses her *own* gifts in the service of family and of others, not because of her husband. The allure of charm and beauty are seen as secondary, accidental properties – rather, it is her talent, her hard work and her wisdom which win her the admiration of her contemporaries. Again, the message seems clear. The gifts we are given are to be used – for the well-being of our families, for the building up of our communities, for the praise of God – they are not to be left idle, buried profitlessly in the ground.

So how do we use *our* gifts? How do we profit ourselves and others with the talents entrusted to us? Strangely, as I pondered today’s gospel, something jumped out at me which I hadn’t noticed before. When the third servant makes his self-justifying speech before handing back the buried talent, he says something rather interesting. He says *“I was afraid and so I went off and hid your talent”* – “I was afraid”. The man clearly has some ability in his master’s initial estimation, since even he was entrusted with something – but what prevented him from using that “talent” wisely was fear. And that, as we know, has been the story of Mankind since the Fall. Even back in Eden, as Adam converses with the Lord after eating the forbidden fruit, he says *“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid”* (cf. Gen. 3:10). It is so often that fear, that being afraid of what others might think of us, of what others might demand of us, of what others might *need* from us, which so often can hold us back from using our talents wisely – just like the “good-for-nothing” servant.

In his Rule, Benedict writes a very important little chapter – chapter 68 – called *“The Assignment of Impossible Tasks to a Brother”*. Benedict says that sometimes a superior may give a brother a burdensome task, something he fears is impossible. If this happens, the brother should obey, but – and it is an *important* but – if he finds, on tackling the challenge, that it really *is* impossible, he should go and explain the matter gently and patiently to the superior. The superior is then free either to change his mind or to insist on the task, and if he chooses the latter, the brother must *“recognise that this is best for him. Trusting in God’s help he must – in love – obey”* (RSB 68: 4b-5). That might seem a little theoretical, perhaps even a little irrelevant, but I would guess that most monks have had some “C.68 experiences” – I know I certainly have. I can remember only too clearly the feeling of horror and confusion when in 2004, Fr Gabriel himself asked me to take over as a Housemaster in our College, the same feelings when Abbot Cuthbert asked me to become Vocations Co-ordinator for the community, and perhaps above all that same dread and terror in 2013 when I was asked to come here to St Benet’s as Prior. I felt I had none of the skills, none of the talents, no training at all for *any* of those “impossible tasks”. I very nearly asked the Abbot to be released from all of them. But perhaps the strangest thing, having decided just to “do my best”, all three roles have been some of the most blessed and most “growth-filled” years of my monastic life – and I hope I have not caused too much damage along the way!

Often, we are too blinkered by fear to accept challenge, to accept growth, to take risks. But when someone else sees a talent in you which you cannot see for yourself, when someone trusts you enough to ask you to undertake a task you feel ill-suited to, that is not the time for fear, but the time for trust. As in the parable, it is not the time to bury the talent, but the time to use it. And that *is* how God sees each one of us. God sees many things in us that we cannot see in ourselves. And, like the master in the parables, He has given us so many gifts, entrusted us with so many talents. Will we dare to use them?

Again and again in the Gospels, Jesus reaches out to his disciples and says: “Do not be afraid”. When he walks on the lake towards the near-drowning apostles, he says: “Do not be afraid, it is I” and the storm ceases. To the terrified Peter, James and John on Mt Tabor after the Transfiguration he says: “Arise, do not be afraid” (Mt. 17:7), and to the women, fleeing after the angelic vision at the Empty Tomb on the morning of the resurrection, he says: “Do not be afraid, but tell my brothers to go to Galilee” (Mt. 28:10). Jesus says the same to us this morning: *Do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid to use the gifts which I have given you. Do not be afraid to take the risk of loving each other, as I have loved you. Do not be afraid. And just as that same Risen Jesus transformed the terrified apostles in the Upper Room to be the bold preachers of the Gospel, so too – if we will trust him – he will transform us too, and make us to be worthy of his Kingdom. Do not be afraid. Amen.

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