

Thirty-third Sunday of the Year

A man got mad with God. "God," he said, I have been praying daily for three years that I should win the lottery. You told us to ask and we shall receive. How come I never received all these three years I have been asking?" Then he heard the voice of God, loud and clear. "My dear son," says God. "Please do me a favour. Buy a lottery ticket." This is not supposed to be a promotional for lotteries. Rather it illustrates the saying: "If you want to win, you have to play." A recent critic said that there are two kinds of people in our churches today: risk-takers and care-takers. The problem with care-takers is that they might show up at the undertaker's with little to show for the lives they have lived. Jesus warns us against this in today's gospel Parable of the Talents.

In the parable we hear about **"a man going on a journey who summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability"** (Matt 25:15). From the beginning of the story we are told that the servant who received just one talent is a man of little ability. He is not a genius. Yet it is interesting to note that the master has a talent even for his relatively disadvantaged servant. All God's children have got their talents, even those who appear to have very minimal abilities in comparison with the more gifted ones.

The master departs and the first two servants **"went off at once and traded"** with their talents. The third servant, on the other hand, digs a hole in the ground and buries his one talent. Why does he do that? Because he is afraid he is going to lose it if he trades with it. He must have reasoned like this: "Well, those with more talents can afford to take a risk. If they lost a talent, they could make it up later. But me, I have only one talent. If I lose it, end of story! So I better play it safe and just take care of it." Many of us in the church are like this third servant. Because we do not see ourselves as possessing outstanding gifts and talents, we conclude that there is nothing that we do. Do you know a woman who loves to sing but who would not join the choir because she is afraid she is not gifted with a golden voice? Do you know a young man who would like to spread the gospel but is afraid he does not know enough Bible and theology? When people like this end up doing nothing, they are following in the footsteps of the third servant who buried his one talent in the ground.

The surprise in the story comes when the master returns and demands an account from the servants. First, we discover that even though the first servant with five talents had made five more talents and the second servant with two talents had made two more talents, both of them receive exactly the same compliments: **"Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master"** (verses 21, 23). They are rewarded not in proportion to how many talents each has made but in proportion to how many talents each of them started off with. Booker T. Washington was right on target when he said that "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles that one has overcome while trying to succeed."

There are more reasons than one why the third servant decided to hide his talent. Maybe he compared himself to the other servants with more talents, saw himself at the bottom rung of the ladder, and became discouraged. He did not realise that with his one talent, if he made just one more talent, he would be rewarded equally as the servant with five talents who made five more. We are not all measured by the same rule. To whom much is given, much is required.

All of us in the church today have received at least one talent. We have received the gift of faith. Our responsibility as men and women of faith is not just to preserve and "keep" the faith. We need to trade with it. We need to sell it to the men and women of our times. We need to promote and add value to faith. This is a venture that brings with it much risk and inconvenience. But, unless we do this, we stand in danger of losing the faith just as the third servant lost his talent. The way to preserve the faith, or any other talent that God has given us, is to put it to work and make it bear fruit.