

Reflection for Sunday the 33rd Week of the Year

FIRST READING: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

A reading from the Book of Proverbs:

When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls. Her husband, entrusting his heart to her, has an unfailing prize. She brings him good, and not evil, all the days of her life. She obtains wool and flax and works with loving hands. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her fingers ply the spindle. She reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy. Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting; the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her a reward for her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

Blessed are you who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways! For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; Your children like olive plants around your table.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

SECOND READING: Thessalonians 5:1-6

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians:

Concerning times and seasons, brothers and sisters, you have no need for anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night. When people are saying, "Peace and security, " then sudden disaster comes upon them, like labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, for that day to overtake you like a thief. For all of you are children of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:14-30

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus told his disciples this parable: "A man going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.' His

master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.' Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.' Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.' His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Sunday the 33rd Week of the Year

What makes the wife worthy in the reading from Proverbs? Is it her desire to do house-work? Is it her talents and gifts? Is it her care for the poor? We pray, at mass a prayer like this, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." What makes us worthy? What happens when we pray that prayer? Why do we pray the prayer in the first place? Granted, it's part of our ritual and part of the preparation for receiving communion. We turn to God. However, God gives us the desire to turn to God in the first place. God makes us worthy. God made the wife worthy. God gave her a trusting and devoted husband. The wife was filled with God. God is love. Love made her worthy. God shared love with her. She was filled with love. That is what she shared with those she loved. Her love filled her family and all she met.

The role of a wife and mother has changed greatly in my lifetime. This reading comes out of an ancient cultural background. It is not a testimonial to roles or wifely duty. It's about an element of family and motive we all need and know. When I was little, my mother was a house-wife. There were four of us children ranging eight years apart. As I prepared for high-school, my mother took a job beyond our home. Tuition was much lower in those days, but so were salaries. What were my parent's motives for that change? They wanted to provide us with the best they could. Why? They loved the four of us. Culture has changed much since the days of the Old Testament, but love remains much the same. Love shared will always grow.

Thessalonians presents a potentially frightening image of the return of Jesus. Who looks forward to a thief in the night? Who hopes for disaster? Yet what is all around us now? We fear. We have been living with a terrible disease that spreads among us infecting more and more of us. There may be a vaccine coming, but not until late spring of next year. Our political leaders have forgotten the traditional definition of politics; the art of the possible. Instead they exhibit poor sportsmanship and refuse to cooperate with any one opposed to them. We divide the one human race into us and them forgetting that each of us is a beloved child of God. Paul described a situation that sounds familiar. Will Jesus' second coming be worse?

I maintain the truth of God's Word. The gospel is good news not bad. We may have been facing horrors, but as I write and you read, we are not overcome. Nothing can rob us of our faith,

hope and love. We may lose our health and wealth but we will never lose these three virtues. Granted my faith in institutions and those in authority may diminish, but I don't believe in princes; I believe in God. This pandemic may drag on and my hope for the future may begin to lag, but being tired does not diminish my hope in God. God has brought me to this day. God is not the future either; God is now. I have not seen and have not spoken to my family face to face in many months. Phone calls, emails and text messages are not the same, but they are still and effective means to say I love you and I miss you.

How does Paul expect us to remain awake and sober? Hard times happen; our hearts may ache in the process. Paul spoke or wrote to a community. What held them in painful times? They believed together in Christ. They hoped for Jesus' promise of forgiveness, eternal life and to return. What filled them were God's gifts; especially faith, hope and love. How did these gifts strengthen them? They shared them; what they gave returned to them more deeply. This passage is only part of Paul's message. We began to read First Thessalonians a few weeks ago. The letter began with Paul praising the community's cohesiveness and strengths. It ends with Paul's hopes and prayers for them. The context of scripture is as important as the context of our lives.

In preparation for this reflection, I have read a number of commentaries and other's reflections on this gospel. Some were challenging, but one was disturbing. This story of Jesus is a parable. Jesus' parables are always ambiguous. He intended for us to dig deeply to find their meaning. Who could the man be? What did he really entrust to the three men? What did they give back? What did two get and what did the third lose?

What is a talent? All of us have talents. There is a difference between talent and skill. Talents are innate and skills are learned. Other than that the ends of them are the same. They can enhance our ability to live and enjoy life. I remember preachers focusing on the obvious play on words to encourage the rest of us that practice makes perfect. Don't waste what God has given as a gift. My parents used to use this gospel as a motive to practice the piano and to do my homework.

A Talent was a Greek term. The gospels and the rest of the New Testament were originally written in Greek. It is an amount of wealth. Specifically it is the accrued wealth of a lifetime; money, possessions and home. It may also include experience, family and knowledge. Our current translation used the Greek term. Our previous translation translated it to one thousand silver pieces. A talent is no trivial matter.

Other preachers have focused on monetary implications. Don't squander, save and invest your money. This may be good financial advice, but I can't envision Jesus supporting rampant capitalism or acting like a bank or investment firm. Who was the rich man? If we look carefully at his qualities, what do we see? How do the super rich get that way? This is also a first century eastern Mediterranean context. People were always, and sometimes are today, suspicious of the super rich. Was their wealth ill gotten? Didn't they lie, cheat and steal to accrue such wealth? Aren't they ruthless, amoral and aggressive people? Remember, in the days of Jesus very few people had much wealth. Does God have such objectionable qualities? Does God want us to have them too? By hook or by crook the first two men have turned out the same way as their patron.

What of the failed man? He described the rich man's objectionable qualities with eloquence. The patron does not contest the veracity of the words. As a matter of fact, the last man's fate is solid evidence of the rich man's personality. Does Jesus want us to become like that? This is a truly disturbing image! If this is supposed to be insight into the heart of God, why would godliness be a virtue? Take away what he has, give it to the one who has the most and throw him out into darkness. Good God or bad god?

Of course God is good. There's something else going on here. I've laid the foundation in my reflections on the first two readings. What made the wife worthy? How did the Thessalonians live? God has gifted us with many gifts. Here we are. We are alive; we were born into a family who loves us. We have intelligence, talents and memory. We have friends, community and a place among them. We live in a world of wonder and wonders. Nature surrounds us. We build, work and discover. We can find the art of the possible in dealing with those with whom we don't agree. We can seek in one another the presence of God. Our faith can lead us to find meaning in what seems meaningless, hope in what seems hopeless and love in what seems hateful. The grace of God can lead us through places we've never been. As this day happens, it will never happen again. What made the wife worthy was God. God is love. The love she shared kept giving. God makes us worthy. The gospel of Luke 6:38 put it well, "Give, and gifts will be given you. Good measure, pressed and shaken down and running over, will be poured into your lap; for whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you in turn."

A reflection like this is helpful for me. I was exposed, possibly, to COVID 19 a week ago last Monday. I discovered it last Sunday and I was tested last Monday. I have gone into quarantine also on Monday. By the time line of exposure, and as I wait to hear the results, which may arrive by next Monday, fourteen days will have passed. So far I feel fine and exhibit no symptoms. I hope it's a false alarm. I have been afraid and anxious. Fortunately, a reflection like I just made has been helpful to find God's guidance through my fear and anxiety. I have kept in contact with my family too. They've been supportive. My brother has had two scares like this at work. Prayer is effective.

God has entrusted to us the same as he entrusted to the three men; a lifetime of gifts and grace. When we stop to reflect on them, God's presence in our lives can only deepen. God remains through, with and in us always. As we came from God and remain with God, we will return to God when the grace of this life ends. Through the gifts of this life, we glimpse the eternal and unconditional God of love.

May all our actions keep each other safe and may God's love be our strength.

James D. Beath
November 14-15, 2020