

Thirty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Funerals are never meant to declare people to be saints, but they are opportunities to look back on people's lives and to recognise the gifts that God has given to them. We say things about people when they are dead that we may never have got around to saying when they were alive. I took part in the funeral of a wonderful man on Friday who was remembered with great love by his family. I remember him as being a very good house painter and someone who had a wonderful garden. But he was more importantly a very good father and a man of faith. In his retirement he was caring for Archbishop Gleeson's garden when Pope John Paul II came to Adelaide. In pride of place on his mantelpiece was a photo taken of him and his wife meeting Pope John Paul at the Archbishop's House.

Jesus tells a parable today that helps us to reflect upon how we use whatever gifts we have been given. We notice first that the master in the story knew the ability of his servants. As he was about to go abroad he called them to him and gave one five talents, another two and gave one talent to the third, each according to his ability. He must have been a very wealthy man, because a talent is a huge amount of money. One commentator tells us that it was the equivalent of 15 years of average wages. Even the one who was given only one talent still had a lot of money to play with.

The ones who were given five and two talents used well what they had been given. They doubled their master's money. The one who was given the one talent feared that he might lose it, or someone might steal it from him. He did the safe thing by burying it in the ground. When he offered back the one talent that he had been given he was told that he had made a very poor choice. At least the bankers would have given him some interest. He was accused of being a wicked and lazy servant and what he had been given was taken from him and given to the servant with all the money.

The context for the story is one where Jesus is telling his disciples to be prepared for the coming of the Son of Man at the end of time. It comes just before the picture that Jesus paints of the last judgement. It can be a pretty strong reminder for us of the need to use well whatever God has given to us in this life, so that we can be ready to enjoy the happiness of the next. The first two servants are told, "Well done good and faithful servant; you have shown that you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness." The one who didn't use the talent entrusted to him was "thrown out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

You and I can easily see ourselves as being like that servant with only one talent. Perhaps as we are getting older we might be thinking that because we cannot do the things that we used to do we have less and less to offer to others. We might be thinking that we are unable to make any difference to the modern world in which we live.

Perhaps this is a good time to notice again today's reading from the Book of Proverbs. When we heard it today did we think of it as being a bit out of date, perhaps even patronising to women? It is a hymn of praise to "a perfect wife". Another way of looking at what was written could be that it is a reflection upon a role that is often forgotten. It is a way of celebrating the gifts of women that are often unnoticed or just taken for granted. It is the picture of a woman whose heart is concerned for those beyond her household. "She holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy. Charm is deceitful and beauty empty; the woman who is wise is the one to praise.

In our gospel Jesus wants to remind us that we will not be judged by what we have, but by how we use whatever little we seem to have. And most of us have much more to offer than what we think. I think one talent that Jesus would want us to recognise in us is the gift of faith that we have lived as best we could

throughout our lives. Maybe we can't help our grandchildren out with their maths problems; maybe we can't help them when their computers won't do what they are supposed to do. But we can help them to understand things that are much more important for them. We can be that person of faith that they come to when the things that they put their hope in fall apart. We can be the one who every so often tells them that we are praying for them. We can perhaps remind them that God loves them even more than we do. Pope Francis has often reminded us of the unique role that grandparents and other older people in our community have. He calls them the bearers of wisdom. He tells us that our modern world needs these bearers of wisdom more than ever. As older people of faith we can be witnesses of the relationship of love that we have with the God who sustains us. We can reveal to our grandchildren something that we have learnt from Jesus about trust, or hope or forgiveness. That is a very beautiful use of the talents that we have been given.

Faith, like any gift, is given to us to be used well and to share with others. May the Lord help us to value anew the faith that we have been given and by using it allow it to grow for our benefit and for the benefit of others.