

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year A)

November 13, 2011

(Proverbs 31: 10-13, 16-18, 20, 26, 28-31; I Thessalonians 5: 1-6; Matthew 25: 14-30)

Introduction

A convicted criminal was about to be electrocuted. The chaplain had helped him prepare for death and now stood beside him as he was strapped into the electric chair. As the chaplain was about to leave, he asked the man: "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The man said: "Yes Father, it would really mean a lot to me if you would hold on to my hand when they pull the switch."

We have reached the time of year when death is all around us in nature. The flowers have largely disappeared, the trees are bare. No wonder the *readings* for these Sundays always call attention to the end of all things. The parable of the talents in today's *Gospel* is about the judgment each of us will face at death. I want to make several observations about that judgment.

The Thought of Judgment Helps Us to Set Aside All Phoniness

Some people consider it improper to talk about death and the judgment that will follow it. There are even people who refuse to tell a close relative that he or she is dying because, they say, they don't want to upset them. Yet one of the best-known thinkers of the 20th century insisted that reflection on our own death is what most of us need in order to become authentic human beings. The point is that, when we come to die, we will in the most absolute sense be alone. For when I meet the Lord in judgment it will just be me standing there. It won't matter what anyone in this world thinks of me. It won't matter how successful I am in the world's eyes. The only thing that will matter will be what the Lord thinks of me. Reflecting on that fact now can make us honest, genuine and focused on what really counts in life.

The Thought of Judgment Reminds Us We Are Managers for God

Throughout the Middle East archeologists have discovered ancient tombs containing great treasures. It is because famous kings and warriors arranged to have their gold and other valuables buried with them. They literally tried to take it with them. Yet we can't take our possessions with us, and there are very good reasons for that. One reason is that in the strict sense they weren't really ours in the first place. The people in the parable are referred to as the master's slaves. We would refer to them today as his managers, and that is what we are. God is the only real owner, and during our life we manage God's possessions. We will have to give a strict accounting of how we carried out our role. It is God's property we are handling. Are we using it in accordance with God's laws and for the purposes God has in mind?

The Thought of Judgment Encourages Us to Act Boldly

A few years ago the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the organization *Doctors Without Borders*. This organization now has thousands of medical volunteers working in 80 countries in our world. Yet it was all started by two young French physicians, one an active communist and one a devout Catholic. They had only themselves and their abilities, yet look what they created. It shows us that God has put marvelous abilities into the hands

of each one of us, and we can accomplish a great deal with those abilities. The parable speaks of the Master entrusting “talents” to us. The talent was a unit of money. In fact it was the largest unit of money in the society where Jesus lived, and was equivalent to about fifteen years of wages, around a million dollars in our currency. The point is that what God puts in our hands is something of great value, and something with which we can accomplish a great deal. We must never become intimidated like the manager who buried his talent, too afraid of failure, too afraid of what other people might think, too timid to take a risk. God expects us to make a genuine difference in our world.

The Thought of Judgment Reminds Us of Our Duty to the Common Good

We might be tempted to interpret today’s parable as picturing something like an amateur show where each of us comes out on stage alone, does our own thing, and then is either praised or blamed. However look at the parable again. The slaves in it are all part of the same household. That means that, as managers, we are carrying out our particular roles within God’s Family. Reaching eternal life then is not a matter of simply being a good lone ranger. It is rather a matter of seeing what place we have in God’s household and carrying that out well. What impact does my life and activity have on the rest of God’s family and in fact on the entire human family? What are the social consequences of my life? What impact is my life and activity having on the common good?

Conclusion

Our second reading today is from a letter St. Paul wrote because some people thought the world was going to end quite soon. So they quit their jobs and began just waiting around for Christ to come. Paul condemns this attitude. In fact all the readings today remind us that the Christian life is not meant to be just an effort to keep out of trouble and play it safe. It is meant to be something active, a life in which we try to use well what God has entrusted to us. If we follow that principle then one day we can hope to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master.”