

THE THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

The end of the world is a theme television and movies have mined profitably for years and years. It's a topic of understandably wide interest to people. Biblically-themed narrators of the world's end often try to read current events as signs of the end-times. Science also provides less-current scenarios. Jesus said, "Of that day or hour, no one knows ... but only the Father" (Mk 13:32). We heard St. Paul indicate, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thes 5:2). He means many won't be expecting the Lord when Christ comes again.

We heard from that part of Matthew's Gospel commentators call the "Eschatological Discourse;" *eschatological* meaning "about the last things," in other words, "about the end." Chronology – time and timing – do have a part to play in God's salvific plan. But *time* is very much not at the heart of the issue. It matters not when Christ will come in glory, only that he will.

Matthew has placed another parable immediately before the parable we heard today. That preceding one is that "Parable of the Ten Virgins" of which you know. If you recall, in that story ten maidservants – five wise ones and five foolish ones – had all fallen asleep because the bridegroom arrived later than anticipated. In that story, none of the ten women were awake when the master returned. Therefore, the time of his coming was not what separated the foolish from the wise, it was prior preparedness or the prior lack of preparedness that spelled the difference (Mt 25:1-13). Even if we are all asleep at the end, we can also make ready in advance to be among the "wise," among the elect.

And now we come to the "Parable of the Talents" (Mt 25:14-30). And once again, time or timing is not in the foreground. Did the rich man tell the three servants when he would be back? We aren't told that he did; apparently, the time of his return wasn't especially important to the

story. Were the three servants surprised when the master came back when he did? We aren't told that they were; apparently, the timing of the master's return doesn't affect the story or its characters either.

“The ‘Parable of the Talents’ is often understood as an exhortation to make good use of our gifts of nature or grace, little or great. [Yet] such a commentary is far from exhausting the content of the parable” (*Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year*, Volume 4, p. 252). The notion of *trust* is another way into this fable.

Take the master's trust of his three servants. The *talent* was the largest and heaviest biblical unit of weight in 1st century Palestine. Estimates of the value of the talent in terms of the present value of the U.S. dollar have ranged from \$1,000 per to \$30,000 per talent. I have even seen a talent estimated to have a present day value of \$360,000 each, though I also suspect there is a math mistake in that estimate. Nonetheless, whatever a talent's worth, it is clear that the Lord is talking about a lot of money! The master entrusted an enormous sum of money to one servant, a huge amount of money to another servant, and a lot of money to the third servant ... and then he goes away, leaving them alone with a ton of his money! That's the kind of trust the master had in his servants. And the kind of trust the Lord has in us. He trusts us with great powers. (Powers such as the ability to participate with him in creation, procreating children: a power we must not reject.)

Now consider the trust of the three servants. Two of the three exhibited great trust. They trusted in themselves; they had the confidence based on self-knowledge that they could make money with the principle amount entrusted to them. They had no fear that they'd lose their master's money. But they not only didn't fear because they trusted themselves, they also didn't fear because they had sure trust in their lord. They trusted that, even if they were unsuccessful in

making more money or even if they lost the seed money, their master would not punish them or let them go. The third servant, however, had no such trust; he didn't trust either in himself and his abilities or in his lord. He took buried the talent given him so he would not lose it or be tempted to misuse it. This servant lived in fear; he feared failing and he feared his master. Trust did not characterize this one's character or life.

Sadly, not everyone has a healthy capacity for trust. So much of that ability is formed so early in life. A newborn trusts immediately, especially trusts the mother and soon the father. But a baby's trust can be destroyed so easily: destroyed by neglect, by abuse, by abandonment, by lack of love. It is said that a person's personality is pretty well set by the time one reached age three. And once that initial trust is exchanged for a sense of distrust, then people, and the world, and God are thought to be threatening. How hard such a life is; what a burden living would be.

We are all called to intimacy with God through Christ. And intimacy requires trust, otherwise we keep God and others at arms-length, never getting close enough to be helped and consoled. Two of the three servants, in reward for their trust, were drawn even further into their lord's confidence. The third was dismissed for having no faith in his lord's love for him.

Do not be afraid. Recall the story of Joseph sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. In time, Joseph had grown in wisdom, favor, and court prominence with the Pharaoh of Egypt. When a famine of seven years threatened his father Jacob and his brothers with starvation, Joseph saw to all their needs. I mention this in closing in order to quote a verse in that story that works well with today's Gospel. Joseph's steward calms the trembling brothers, "Be at ease, you have not need to fear. Your God and the God of your father ... put treasures in your bags for you" (Gen 43:23).

Do not distrust. We must all pray for trust and work on trusting: in ourselves, in others, and in God. Be assured: we have graces and gifts enough for life and love.

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Readings:

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

Psalm 128:1-5

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30