

THE EMMAUS SERIES

33rd Sunday, Year A

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

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-6

Matthew 25: 14-30

Come and join in your master's happiness

The parable in today's gospel reading is so well known, that the word, 'talent', has become part of our language. The original story of Jesus, however, had a far more serious message than the development of natural gifts. The 'talent' Jesus refers to was a large quantity of precious metal (26 kgs of gold or silver). The immensity of the wealth entrusted to the servants was far beyond the experience of Jesus' hearers. The parable challenges them to recognise that God's immense blessings bring great responsibilities.

The sharp edge of the parable, as Matthew reports it, seems to indicate a background of controversy. It may well be that the original parable of Jesus was a challenge to the Sadducees – the conservative Temple establishment who were not open to wholesome developments that had taken place in the biblical tradition, and were opposed, therefore, to the mission of Jesus. Scholars find grounds for this in the wording of the parable. The master 'hands over' the talents; this term was associated in old Israel with the passing on of the traditions of God's people. The term 'gained' - applied to the profits made by the servants - was associated with the winning of converts. In their self-centred conservatism, the Sadducees had no concern to carry forward Israel's mission to be 'a light to the nations'. As the parable was recalled in Matthew's community, however, it may have been directed against the dangers of complacency in that community - that settled for the minimum requirements of life as the Lord's disciples, and was not ready to set out upon the great adventure of putting into practice the program of the Sermon on the Mount. The conclusion, 'To anyone who has will be given more; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away' – a saying of Jesus that appears several times in the gospels – was probably added by Matthew, to drive home the point of the parable. Its meaning for Jesus was that one who is spiritually open will enjoy God's on-going blessings; whereas one who is closed will miss the opportunities offered them. Matthew emphasises the seriousness of the parable's lesson by concluding his narrative – as he does in other places - with reference to the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' in store for those who have no place in the Kingdom.

The parable of Jesus points to the 'Day of the Lord' when God's people will be called to account for the responsibilities brought by the great blessings they have received. In today's reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, Paul continues his instruction concerning the Lord's return, echoing the imagery used by Jesus in the gospels. Life must go on; it is not given to us to know the 'times and seasons' of the final reckoning; the 'Day of the Lord' will come 'like a thief in the night'; God's people must 'stay awake and sober', living as 'children of the light'. It is not difficult to see that these themes provide the background of today's parable. The master is a long time in coming, and arrives unexpectedly to 'go through the servants' accounts'. The servants who have administered well the wealth entrusted to them are to be entrusted with 'greater things'; they will share in 'their master's happiness' – a clear reference, for those who have ears to hear, of the blessings of the final Kingdom.

If we appreciate the greatness of the blessings brought by faith in Christ, we will be aware of the responsibilities they bring.

John Thornhill SM