



33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, November 15, 2020 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Proverbs 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 128:1–5 | **Response:** Psalm 128:1a

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–6

Gospel Acclamation: John 15:4a, 5b

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14–30, 25:14–15, 19–21

Preached at: the Jesuit Institute in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

All our readings are taken from near the end of their books, and so are summaries in a way of their main and most important messages. This is not surprising as we come to the end of the Church's Liturgical Year next week. I want to briefly examine each of the readings and then talk about Fear and Fear of the Lord, which I think are the overarching themes we're called to contemplate this morning.

If we were living before the #MeToo movement, and the recent gains of feminism, as the author of the first reading did, we would all be forgiven for thinking that our first reading described the 'perfect wife'. We hear how welcoming and gracious she would be, caring for all, not just in her home, but to those outside it too, the poor and the needy. Her house is one marked by goodness and not evil. She "fears the Lord", we're told. And, presumably the men, are told to "give her a share in the fruit of her hands".

Obviously, our Societies today are thankfully different, where women are not patronized this way, and where men and women are now seen to be inherently equal to each other. But this reading comes from the Book of Proverbs, and so is operating at another level too, one that transcends times and cultures, and is trying to persuade its readers towards Wisdom. And indeed this is who this 'perfect wife' is, the personified image of Lady Wisdom. The book of Proverbs describes in the first five chapters a picture of Mistress Folly, the seductress, who tries to lure into her wicked world the young who do not yet know Lady Wisdom. But as

one reads through the book of Proverbs, the reader is made a member of Lady Wisdom's household and one begins to pursue a life built on applying the lessons of wise elders to their own experience, and so become Wise themselves.

"Fear of the Lord" is one of the most common virtues taught by the Wisdom books of the Bible. The phrase can be found also in the prophets and psalms and elsewhere, but it is central to understanding Israel's notion of wisdom. Proverbs 1:6 defines the beginning of wisdom as fear of the Lord. But what does that mean? It cannot mean that we are afraid of God, for that would contradict the image of God that we have – who is love, who made us in love and for love. Rather, it is a stance, it means standing in reverent awe of the divine presence. It involves wonder at the goodness of God, contemplating the awesome idea of being part of a chosen people, a commitment to obeying God's commandments, and, above all, faithful worship – gratefully remembering that the Creator created us. Our Responsorial Psalm emphasizes this theme noting that the ideal family is one whose members live in true "fear of the Lord."

Our second reading from the end of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians records Paul's warning about being prepared for the second coming of Christ. It echoes many sayings of Jesus himself in the gospels on being always ready and not being caught unawares when the master returns late to the household or the bridegroom arrives late to his wedding feast. Paul emphasizes the need to be alert to the dangers of complacency and being caught in the darkness. Presumably he has moral behavior in mind. Living the gospel as disciples of Christ demands constant vigilance to imitate Jesus' own life and follow his commands. For we've all found ourselves in moments of darkness and despair, and yet we know we must continue to hope, to live in fear of the Lord, who will enlighten our situation and care for us, we must trust in the inheritance and heritage of our faith and in the wisdom it offers to always trust in the Truth as it has been passed down to us about a God who is personally concerned with each of us... a God who is personally concerned with each and everyone of us.

Our Gospel today is a reminder of that in a way. It's the familiar parable of the talents which begins with the announcement that the master is going away. He entrusts his assets and resources into the hands of his servants to manage them in his absence and he will hold them accountable at the end for how they carried on in his name while he was gone. This is clearly an allegory for Jesus' return to his Father, and of what he expects the Church to do in the present world, and what

he will ask at his second coming. A talent in this context is not meant to be a piece of gold – though in that time it was worth an awful amount, 15 years wages some scholars say. But we understand it to mean the gifts God has given each one of us. We all have some talent or gift and in the story the Master is happy to see how the servants have used their talents. The one who buried his talent, is like the person who refused to respond and follow the Holy Spirit in their life. And that was why it was so wrong. Because the God who is personally concerned with each and every one of us, has sent his Spirit to guide us, to offer us hope and to enlighten our minds with Wisdom and the other Gifts of the Spirit.

Those who doubled their talents are those who live in the Spirit. Once we see this, we can also understand why those who do have the Spirit will grow even richer in Christ's life while those who deny the Spirit lose whatever seeds of life they started with. "For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

If we deny God's gifts to us, if we fear standing in the light and prefer to skulk in shadows, if we fear being who we were created to be, instead of standing in the awe-filled fear of the Lord who created us for love, then we will never truly live, we will never truly feel alive. We must let God's spirit live in and through us.

Let's pray today that we might see the gifts God has given each of us. For as we read in the Prophet Isaiah, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are 'the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.'

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