

## 33<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

### Year A

In today's Gospel we are introduced to a man who entrusts his property to his servants while he is abroad. He is an enterprising employer, who hopes that his own flair and daring in business matters will be reflected in his servants' attitude to this new challenge. He doesn't instruct them what to do with the talents; he trusts them to use their own initiative and imagination in this economic venture. As in all stories and jokes with three characters, our attention is focused on number three: the third servant is portrayed as the one who refuses to involve himself in the spirit of the enterprise. He believes that the safest way to handle his talent is to bury it and return it intact to his master.

Jesus is seen to be making a point against the scribes and the Pharisees. Their chief aim was to keep the Law which they had been given exactly as it was – not to change it, not to develop it, not to alter it in any way. In their own phrase their mission was “to build a fence around the Law.” It's as if they wanted to put the Law into a state of perpetual coma or paralysis- that way they should avoid the risk of its walking the streets, where it would have to change and grow according to the conditions it met. Better to keep the Law in an oxygen tent, under constant surveillance, and keep it alive on hot air.

Like the man with the one talent, the Pharisees are seen to have an investment in keeping things exactly as they were, and it is for that stale attitude that Jesus condemns them. In this parable Jesus tells us that there can be no religion without risk, no religion without adventure, no religion without enterprise. Willingness to dare is an essential part of our faith.

The parable speaks to us about God. Through the story we are invited to imagine a God who bestows gifts on all of us – and so we are gifted. He is a God who gives talents to all of us – and so we are talented. What matters is not what people's talents are, but how they are used in the service of the kingdom. The parable imagines God as a gambler, one who is forever taking risks in entrusting us with his gifts. He has no guarantee on his return, but that is the risk. He dares us to share a common enterprise; he trusts us to do it in our own way, knowing that if it succeeds *both his will and ours will be done*.

The parable also explores different attitudes to God. The first two servants have a completely different attitude to their master than the third.

They know that their master is expecting them to share his business attitude for the sake of possible advantage. They know that he expects them to travel on his trust and share his go-for-broke style. The third servant shares none of this, regarding his master as a fierce exacting man. He is afraid of his master, so he plays out his own fearful attitude by becoming an undertaker to the talent he has received. Instead of rejoicing in his talent, he organizes a quiet funeral service. To lose nothing, he risks nothing. And, not surprisingly, nothing comes of it.

The defence of the third servant is interesting. He focuses on the reputed meanness of the master, not on his own proven lack of enterprise. He takes the problem away from where it is – with himself – and places the problem where it is not – with his master. He portrays the master as harsh; there is no admission that his own creativity leans towards the cemetery. He ends up burying part of himself. And we should only bury what is dead.

We can ask ourselves how we imagine God, and how the way we see him influences our attitudes and behaviour. Is God an exacting master who demands that we return to him exactly what we have been given ? Or is God a gambler and an adventurer, who lives in the fond hope that we will live in the spirit of his trust ?

Is our life of faith a life of fear? The American cartoonist Ashleigh Brilliant has a cartoon with two luminous eyes, rounded in terror, peering from the dark enclosure of a stone vault. Underneath, the caption reads: “If you’re careful enough, nothing bad or good will ever happen to you.” That can never be a portrait of Christian faith. Our faith begins with God. God risked his own Son, the talent of his life. He takes a risk with us every day. It seems only fair that we should return the favour and take a risk with God.