

Homily for The Thirty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year A)(15/11/20)
Second Sunday of the second lockdown

Once again, the Gospel reading that we have heard proclaimed today is a familiar story. It is a parable about a man, obviously a man of some wealth, who distributes his property to three of his servants for them to care for while he is away. It is worth noting that he hands this property out 'each in proportion to his ability'. So, the man who receives five talents is a more able man than the one who receives three, and he in turn is more able than the man who receives just one.

So the man with the greatest ability does well, and doubles what was left with him. The one considered of middling ability does even better, because he also doubles what was left with him. But the least able is paralysed into doing nothing: at least he doesn't lose what was entrusted to him. He knows that he is the least able of the three, and he probably realises that what he is doing will be a disappointment, but he cannot bring himself to grasp the opportunity that has been given to him.

I suppose that as a rule we read this parable as being about gifts and talents that we have been given, and the need to use them productively. If I were lucky enough to be a good speaker, then that would be a talent to use well rather than squander, but also if I were good at physics or at medicine, or at painting, or whatever, this talent has been given to me to be used for the good of the human family, and I have a responsibility to use it wisely for the service of others. That, it seems to me, is a perfectly reasonable reading of it, and is a good message for us to hear. The least able servant squanders even the small opportunity that he is given, and fails to achieve anything. He is given something for the building up of the kingdom, but he decides to keep it safe rather than to use it. Treasure that is buried is certainly safe, but it is also sterile and fruitless.

Reading this story in this present time, this ongoing time of coronavirus with all the limitations and losses that this imposes on us, it occurs to me that perhaps we might find something new here. What if this is not just a story that summons us to use our innate abilities and opportunities well, a sort of one off audit of how we use what we have been given; what if it is also something more. Might this parable actually be an ongoing challenge to us to identify afresh, time and time again, in all the many and varied times and seasons of life and all the unpredictable circumstances, the different opportunities that we have? Might it actually be summoning us to a new way of living that is always focused on seeking and grasping new opportunities rather than settling for what is safe and familiar?

I have never read this story like this before, but in our present situation it seems clear to me that this is exactly the message that it has for us. Jesus is not just saying to us 'have you used the talents and gifts that God gave you wisely and productively?' He is saying something much more challenging, he is saying to us

‘In the situation you are in today, the unique combination of the way the world is, the state of life that you are in, the particular opportunities and challenges of this very day, are you grasping the opportunities, or are you letting them slip through your fingers?’ These are challenging times, but there have been challenging times before and no doubt there will be again. I think this scripture reading is about how we react to the opportunities that are presented to us. Do we grasp them, or do we squander them? In this particular time, when the world is turned on its head and things seem so strange, the Gospel summons us to respond by turning our energy to hunting out the opportunities and seizing them. It calls us to look at the new ways that we might be able to bring love, and hope, and friendship and joy and peace into people’s lives. The great temptation is to try and make things as much as possible like they always were; but perhaps this is squandering an opportunity.

Here and now the very particular circumstances of our world offer us new challenges, but also new opportunities. Will we have the openness and the energy and the faith to look for them and to seize them, or will we let them slip away, too paralysed by fear or a sense of our own smallness to do more than bury them safely in the ground. We can leap forward to a new and better, more human way of living, or we can fall back on what is familiar and therefore safe. Our generation has an opportunity that no other has had, or will have: our generation, and only our generation, has the opportunity to find in these times new ways to make the world better, make our lives, our families, our church, our communities better. Or we could bury the opportunity in a safe place. But that would be a shame.