Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings continue the wisdom theme from last Sunday and focus on how we make use of the gifts we have. They invite us to recognise our gifts and responsibilities, to use them for the benefit of others, and to live with wisdom and integrity. The intention is that we prepare for the Lord's coming not by waiting passively, but by living faithfully, courageously and generously in the present.

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 Conscious of the fact that this was written by a man, we could make all kinds of assumptions about what constitutes 'a perfect wife'. We do well to consider the Middle Eastern context of the passage and its cultural norms. However, the lesson we can take from it is that, regardless of gender, faithfulness expresses itself in action. The commitment of an authentic human being goes beyond belief and good intentions. There is an underlying message here of doers versus talkers.

The poet of this passage urges us to weigh our actions in the scale of benefit to others. He warns us of the emptiness of charm and beauty that is not reinforced with action that benefits other human beings. She is clearly using her gifts to benefit her family and to go further as she reaches out to the less fortunate and the marginalised.

She does not work for recognition, but the generosity of her gifts and her concern for others are worthy of commendation and imitation.

Psalm 128 The first line of this psalm gives us a good example of how a 'beatitude' works. It shows us that it is a good and worthy thing to reverence the Lord and live by the values of the God who made us.

What are the blessings the psalmist is singing about? It is essentially that fulfilment we receive when we feel confident that we are on the right track. Contentment lies in doing the best we can with what we have, and contributing to the wellbeing of others along the way.

Did I encourage someone today?

Imagine hitting the pillow at night and being able to say, 'Yes' to the question, 'Did I encourage someone today? Did I show my appreciation of someone by listening carefully to what they had to say?' These are not big ticket issues, but they make an enormous difference to the lives of people we interact with.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian community to be awake and ready for the Day of the Lord. It is a day that will come when least expected. The Apostle is referring to the ultimate Day of the Lord, but we can apply his advice to the Lord in our lives. Every day can be a day of the Lord – a day when we live with the consciousness of our values. We have signed on to live the Christ message of, 'Love one another as I have loved you.'

Being awake does not involve inactivity. It means spotting occasions when we can reach out and give others a lift; and it's usually the little things that can help make someone's day. A simple greeting can let someone know they are recognised and appreciated. Who knows? But a smile or greeting could tip another person's day into the sunshine and lift their spirits.

Courtesy is one of the everyday ways we can show kindness, respect and goodwill

Paul tells us in this letter that we are children of light and the upshot is that we have a responsibility to spread the light of Christ through little acts of courtesy. I have always found it interesting that so much can be made of recognised virtues like charity, patience, compassion, gratitude and so on and yet so much goodness can flow from a simple proactive habit of courtesy. Courtesy is one of the everyday ways we can show kindness, respect and goodwill. Our courtesy is a mark of affirmation reassuring people that they are noticed, valued and worthy of consideration

Matthew 25:14-30 This parable is all about the way we respond to the gifts we have and the realisation of our potential. It is so easy to hear this story and feel that the third servant is badly done by. We could think that there is really nothing wrong with being so paralysed by fear that we never step into the unknown or take a risk. The problem here is that the third servant did nothing wrong but his mistake was not measuring up to the expectations of his master.

What happens if you don't use your gifts? They atrophy; they wither away for lack of exercise. Thinking also of the woman in the first reading from Proverbs we could come to the conclusion that the measure of a worthwhile life is found in the responsible exercise of the gifts that have been given to us. The parable has nothing to do with the number of talents the master gave out. It's about the faithfulness, wisdom, courageous generosity and responsibility of the response. Even if the third servant had gained a small return on his investment he would have overcome the fear of not succeeding and exercised some initiative.

Our worth is not measured in comparison with others

Notice there is no comparison between the first and second servant. They are both equally commended for having brought in worthwhile returns on their investments, even though the sums are different. Each one has achieved his potential and stands to receive a suitable reward. It tells us that our worth is not measured in comparison with others. What matters is our faithful response to the opportunities we have seized and the use we have made of our gifts.

The issue with the third servant tells us that fear of failure, criticism or making mistakes can cause us to seize up and not take even a first step to achieve anything worthwhile. Aristotle made this observation: *There is only one way to avoid criticism: do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing*. Commitment to using our talents and being prepared to have-a-go is the first step on the journey to achievement.

Spiritual maturity becomes visible in small but meaningful ways

Doing nothing can mean passing up an opportunity to make a positive difference. The killer, of course, is comparing ourselves to others. An utterly dangerous practice! Spiritual maturity becomes visible in the small but meaningful ways we show dependability, integrity, generosity and care for others.

Rather than waste time comparing ourselves with others we do better to notice the gifts that other people have and offer a word of appreciation where appropriate. This can happen in the context of: they are using their gifts, what about I focus on using and developing mine. After all, we make the best use of our gifts and resources when they help others thrive and contribute to the wellbeing of our communities.

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Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I will not forget you. Love me, and I may be forced to love you.

Norman Vincent Peale. Author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

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Patient: 'My head feels like iron, my neck is stiff as a lead pipe and my nose is completely blocked.'

Doctor: 'Sounds like you need a plumber, not a doctor.'

Laurie Woods