

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Nov 16th 2014

This is the 25th Anniversary of the Assassination of the Jesuits at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

To fear, or not to fear—that is the question. Or so it can seem after an initial glance at today's readings. The responsorial psalm proclaims, "Blessed are those who fear the Lord." Such fear is obviously a positive thing. But in the gospel reading, the third servant "out of fear" hides the gift entrusted to him. And because he does so, he is severely reprimanded by his master. In this case, fear leads to the servant losing everything. It is obviously something negative.

So how do we make sense of this tension?

A key to understanding Matthew's version of the parable of the talents is to pay careful attention to what is said about the "master," who represents Jesus, the glorious Son of Man. During the time of the master's journey—that is, between Jesus' ascension and second coming—he entrusts his servants with gifts. That act of entrustment extends today to us, his disciples. Indeed, the master is extravagantly generous in his bestowal. Notice, too, that he is discerning, for he calibrates gifts according to capacities and ability (that is, he knows each one of us, his servants, intimately). A further detail is that the master gives his servants freedom, encouraging them to use their creativity and industry in making use of the gifts he bestows. Moving ahead to the reckoning of accounts, observe that he takes great delight in his servants' success. And he wants to extend to them—to us—the fullness of life and joy in his presence.

So . . . what is the proper response to this loving, generous, and empowering Lord? The first two servants exemplify such a response. They gladly and earnestly go about their business, producing an abundance of works of love and mercy—this is what "talents" mean in connection with the servants' productivity. Like the woman of the first reading, who symbolizes those who have imbibed the wisdom taught in Proverbs, they reach out their hands to the poor and extend their arms to the needy. They strive to love and please the Lord in all things, especially in their relations and dealings with other people. This response is a manifestation of the "fear of the Lord" that is praised throughout the Bible. Such "fear" is, in actuality, awe and reverence before the God who is so gracious and merciful to us, the awe and reverence that lead each one of us to ask: How can I respond, today, in the concrete circumstances of my life, to such a gracious Lord?

An improper response is also, ironically, a kind of fear. This is exhibited by the third servant. Tragically, his fear is rooted in a false image of his master, whom he regards as harsh and demanding, traits that are belied by all the details outlined above. In fact, while the master acknowledges that he

‘reaps where he does not sow’—which points to divine power—he does not accept the third servant’s description of him as “demanding.” Burdened with a false image of the Lord, the third servant turns in on himself. He buries his gift, thereby hiding his light under a bushel basket.

There are many things today that can cause us anxiety and fear: diminishment and old age; health care and sickness; finances and job insecurity; concern for loved ones; etc. Moreover, we are deluged daily by local, national, and international news stories that evoke alarm. Our world seems to become less safe and secure with each passing day.

All the more, then, do we need to turn to the Lord, to the one who cares intimately for each one of us, who is lavishly generous, who wants us to have life in abundance. In the face of such a loving God, we need not cower in fear (as did the third servant). Rather, we can stand in reverence and awe, delighting in God’s gifts to us. We can respond with hope and energy, graced to bring God’s love and goodness to others (i.e., produce more “talents”). And in doing so, we can embody proper “fear of the Lord.”

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