

**Homily for November 14, 1999
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
Matthew 25:14-30**

We are to use our gifts as best we can when it comes to faith, talent or money.

Use it or lose it! That is Jesus' word to us this morning. Jesus is talking about something far more vast and encompassing than money. It's a parable about how you and I are or are not investing ourselves in the gospel.

It is about more than money. It is about time, talent, money and other resources. It is about the total stewardship of our lives. And in the words of the stand-up comic, it comes with good news and bad news. The good news – for most North American Christians – is that Jesus is a capitalist, at least as far as this parable is concerned. The bad news, given what happens to money stuffed in a mattress during an inflationary cycle of the economy, is this: if you don't use it, you lose it.

This parable is one of three that deal with the type of discipleship necessary for those expecting Jesus to come again. It fits the pattern of such parables of having someone gone for a long time who returns unexpectedly. The parable begins with a description of a man going on a journey – a rapacious merchant whose sole thought is the increase of his fortune. He entrusts his possessions to his servants. The scenario of

an absentee master leaving his property in the hands of the servants was common in first-century Palestine. The amounts given are considerable: one talent being comparable to 15 years wages for an ordinary worker. In this way, the parable illustrates the lavish gifts of God. The first two servants immediately invest the money and cleverly manage to double the amount by the time of the master's return. In the "judgement scene" they are both congratulated for being "faithful," and therefore welcomed to share the "master's joy," a symbol perhaps of the heavenly banquet. Just like the parable of the ten virgins, they are considered faithful or wise because they risked doing something with the gifts of the master while they awaited his return.

But the story really focuses on the third servant who appears to be treated badly. He buries what was entrusted to him. Given the tenuous political situation of Palestine at the time, burying wealth was considered the best security against theft. The original audience would probably have been stunned at a story in which this was not considered acceptable behavior. But this servant is judged wicked and lazy because of his inactivity. He says of himself that it was out of fear that he buried the talent. His own fear paralyzed him, making him unable to risk action. What made him so afraid? Was he scared that he might lose his job and

thus his family might suffer – was it love that prompted the fear and hence the inactivity? Whatever the motive, he was so afraid of failing that he chose to do nothing. You see in Matthew’s gospel such inactivity is reprehensible. It has been suggested that this servant’s first mistake was in his conception of the master. Because he was convinced the master was “hard,” though he himself had been treated quite generously, he acts out of a victim role, fearing the master’s wrath if he should fail. His own perceptions backed him into a corner of inactivity. He rendered himself unable to act upon the gifts he had been given.

What paralyzes us? What regrets dog us? They need not – we need not live with such fear or regret of what might have been. In the words of Walt Whitman in “Leaves of Grass”: “Nothing can bring back the hour of splendor in the grass, glory in the flower. But we shall grieve not, rather draw strength from what remains behind.”

Come to the table. We can invest ourselves in the one who has invested his life in us – mixed bags that we are of fear and hope, trust and courage.

Listen to this passage from a homily given at the funeral of England’s Cardinal Hume. But before you hear it, remember that he had a well-deserved reputation for being a kindly and learned man, faithful and astute, the superbly right choice to be England’s Roman Catholic chief shepherd for two decades. The homilist described how two short months ago when told of his terminal cancer, the cardinal was, at first, tempted to say, “If only...if only I could start over again I would be a much better monk, a much better abbot, a much better bishop. But then I thought (these are his own words) then I thought how much better if I can

come before God when I die, not so say: ‘Thank you that I was such a good monk, good abbot, good bishop,’ but rather, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ For if I come empty handed then I will be ready to receive God’s gift – the gift of the Master. God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

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