

**Homily for November 13, 2005
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

By Father Charles Bowes

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Psalm 128:1-5

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30

We invite God's strength to use our strength wisely and well.

One is amazed by the results of an Internet search for the phrase, "Use it or lose it." The listing easily consists of over a million items. A good portion of this listing deals with issues like free speech, brain function and muscle tone, to name but a few. These are excellent examples, for it is easy to see in such matters that if you don't use it, you certainly will lose it.

Today's Gospel, Matthew 25, offers us another example. A man went on a journey and entrusted his servants with his money. Upon his return, he required an accounting of them. A talent was about 6,000 denarii, and one denarius was equivalent to a day's wage. Therefore, even the servant who received only one talent was entrusted with a sizable amount of money.

Some readers have been troubled by the harshness of the master's treatment of the third man. After all, he did not direct the servants to invest the money. What would cause one to be penalized for not having done so? We can only conclude that investment was presumed. They had been told, in effect, "Use it or lose it."

The readings of these last Sundays of the liturgical year prompt us to look at different aspects of the end-time. Last week, we were exhorted to await that time of fulfillment in constant readiness – to be ready for any experience of God. Today, we are told that we cannot simply sit back and wait for that time to dawn. We have responsibilities; we are to be industrious while we wait.

The man who buried the money in the ground condemned himself with his own words, for he knew that he would be held accountable: "I knew that you were a demanding person," the gospel reads. Thus, he is punished – not because he is a poor manager of funds, but because he did not take his responsibilities seriously enough.

The sketch of the woman in the first reading depicts the complete opposite of this irresponsible man. She not only fulfills her responsibilities; she does so in an exceptional way. This picture of an industrious wife troubles some women who see it as merely a re-inforcement of a patriarchal stereotype. But it should be noted that in Israel's wisdom tradition, the wise person is held up as a model to be emulated. And here, the ideal wise person is a woman. The character of her responsibilities is not the issue. Rather, it is her

faithfulness in carrying them out. They were what her circumstances expected of her, and she was faithful.

There is actually some suggestion implicit in the reading that this woman of wisdom is more energetic and hardworking than her husband (who passes his time in town with prominent leaders). It may well be that her husband is respected by the townsfolk precisely because of his wife's enterprising spirit.

To what do these readings call us today? I think it is important to note that we are accountable to God, not so much for obedience to rules and regulations, but for the responsibilities of our life situation. Parents are to devote themselves wholeheartedly to parenting, teachers to teaching, politicians to lawmaking and so on. The way we fulfill these responsibilities may be influenced by the cultural circumstances of our day, but we fulfill them nonetheless. There is no life calling that is devoid of obligations, and usually they somehow include service to others. It is in faithful accomplishment of the tasks of life that we make present the reign of God among us, that we bring to birth the age of fulfillment. The nourishment of this holy food and fellowship ushers in even now this time of fulfillment as we invite God's strength to use our strength wisely and well.

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