

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Read this in light of these attributes being descriptive of wisdom. Consider how these everyday tasks take on new meaning when done for the glory of God and describe one who follows God closely. Let that understanding come through in your proclamation.

LECTIONARY #157

READING I Proverbs 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31

A reading from the Book of Proverbs

When **one finds a worthy wife,**
her **value is far beyond pearls.**
Her **husband, entrusting his heart** to her,
has an **unfailing prize.**
She brings him **good, and not evil,**
all the **days of her life.**
She obtains **wool and flax**
and **works with loving hands.**
She puts her **hands** to the **distaff,**
and her **fingers ply the spindle.**
She **reaches out her hands** to the **poor,**
and **extends her arms** to the **needy.**
Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting;
the **woman who fears the LORD** is to be **praised.**
Give her a **reward** for her **labors,**
and let her **works praise her** at the **city gates.**

READING I

On this Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, only two weeks before the beginning of a new liturgical year, the First Sunday of Advent, today's readings bring us to thoughts about the fulfillment of the salvation story. We do not know when the time will come, whether it be for ourselves individually or for God's creation in totality, but if we have responded to the grace that is given us in life, we have nothing to fear from a good and gracious God.

On the surface, at least, today's first reading from the Book of Proverbs might be

difficult for some modern readers to embrace, because of what we might call gender stereotyping. However, a deeper look might prove beneficial for everyone. First, this entire section, Proverbs 31:10–31, is composed as an acrostic poem. Written in Hebrew, the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *alef*. The second verse begins with *bet*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on until it arrives at the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *tav*. Despite the patriarchy of the time in which this masterpiece was created, it outlines the skills and vir-

tues of a strong woman. It also picks up much of the feminine imagery that appears elsewhere in this book, which has led some biblical scholars to describe this woman as the concrete and visible image of Lady Wisdom as she is described in Proverbs 1–9. The wisdom literature of the Bible portrays Lady Wisdom as the power of God who is ever-present and active in the world, a radiant light, the source of insight, the bringer of peace, the breath of God's might, and the pure emanation of God's glory (see Wisdom 7:24–30; Proverbs 8:1–36; Sirach 24:1–33).

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5 (1a)

R. Blessed are those who fear the Lord.

Blessed are you who fear the LORD,
who walk in his ways!

For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
blessed shall you be, and favored.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants
around your table.

Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

READING II 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians

Concerning times and seasons, brothers and sisters,

you have no need for anything to be written to you.

**For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord
will come**

like a thief at night.

When people are saying, "Peace and security,"

then sudden disaster comes upon them,

like labor pains upon a pregnant woman,

and they will not escape.

But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness,

for that day to overtake you like a thief.

For all of you are children of the light

and children of the day.

We are not of the night or of darkness.

Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do,

but let us stay alert and sober.

Thessalonians = thes-uh-LOH-nee-uhnz

A reading whose tone is urgent—Paul is imagining what the end of things will be like.

The core of the reading, the "thief in the night."

Emphasis on "not."

Note the contrasts between light and dark, day and night.

READING II

Our second reading is from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, which is believed to have been written around AD 51 and only a couple years after Paul established this community in Thessalonica. Based on Paul's teaching, they apparently believed that the parousia, the return of the risen Christ, was to take place soon after his resurrection. But now it is twenty-five or more years later, and they are concerned that something is amiss. Some members of the community have died, and they fear that they are forever lost. In the section immediately

preceding this reading (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), Paul gives them strong words of encouragement, saying that their deceased loved ones will actually be the first to join the risen Christ in the heavens, when he comes.

In today's reading, Paul picks up a topic that easily flows from this earlier concern. The heart of their unasked question is: "If we have not missed Christ's second coming, when will it happen?" He begins by reminding the community that they already know the answer to this question, but by repeating his message, he offers further

encouragement to the recipients of this letter. The "day of the Lord" is a reference to God's end time judgment of the world borrowed from the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, Amos 5:18-20; Joel 2:1-11; Zephaniah 1:7-8). For those who are unaware and unprepared, the day of the Lord will come as if it were a disaster. The images of a nighttime thief and sudden birth pangs are typical of this type of eschatological (i.e., end time) literature. But Paul departs from these themes and asserts, "you are children of the light," so there is no need to fear the things of

A reading that consists of the telling of a lengthy parable, one whose meaning appears straightforward but whose content suggests something more ambiguous.

Pacing: It's important to keep the different numbers in mind.

Here, the master uses a formulaic phrase to praise the servant.

Once again, the formulaic phrase.

darkness and the night, as long as you stay awake. Though not included in this reading, Paul ends this section of his letter by urging the Thessalonians to be an encouragement to each other, since all of them are on this journey of hope and expectation as they await Christ's second coming. This is our task as well, as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

GOSPEL Our Gospel reading for today is another parable about the end times. As a reminder, parables are fictional stories that establish a

GOSPEL Matthew 25:14–30

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

[Jesus told his disciples this parable:

"A man going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability.

Then he went away.]

Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five.

Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

["After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.

The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five.

He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents.

See, I have made five more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities.

Come, share your master's joy.']

Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said,

'Master, you gave me two talents.

See, I have made two more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

comparison—for example, "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ."—and that involve common, everyday images to communicate their meaning. But parables are also riddles designed to make the reader think deeply about their meaning, and this parable of the talents has several details to make people shake their heads in amazement. For example, the amount of money trading hands in this parable is stupendous! In the ancient world, the value of a talent varied by location and composition, but one example of the estimated value of a talent was 80 pounds of silver, which had an

equivalent value of 6,000 denarii, where a denarius was a full day's wages for most workers. Really! Who gives a servant or employee five talents or perhaps the equivalent of eighty-three years' wages to invest, while they go off on a journey to who-knows-where with no indication of when he will return?

One can imagine that the investment activities of the first and second servants were aggressive, even ruthless, because doubling investments as large as these by righteous means is highly unlikely. Why then does the master praise them? Perhaps

Since you were **faithful** in **small matters**,
 I will give you **great responsibilities**.
Come, share your master's joy!
 Then the **one** who had received the **one talent** came forward
 and said,
 'Master, I knew you were a **demanding person**,
harvesting where you did not **plant**
 and **gathering** where you did not **scatter**;
 so out of **fear** I went **off** and **buried** your **talent** in the **ground**.
Here it is back!
 His master **said** to him in **reply**, 'You **wicked, lazy servant!**
 So you **knew** that I **harvest** where I did not **plant**
 and **gather** where I did not **scatter**?
 Should you not **then** have put my **money** in the **bank**
 so that I could have got it **back** with **interest** on my **return**?
Now then! Take the talent from him and **give** it to the **one**
 with **ten**.
 For to **everyone** who **has**,
more will be **given** and he will **grow rich**;
 but from the **one** who has **not**,
even what he **has** will be **taken away**.
 And **throw this useless servant** into the **darkness outside**,
 where there will be **wailing** and **grinding of teeth**.'"

[Shorter: Matthew 25:14–15, 19–21 (see brackets)]

The viciousness of the master, even though we expect it, is shocking.

Emphasis on "useless."

it is because these two servants are like him. The third servant describes the master as "a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter." In other words, the master's wealth comes from taking from others by force. In an honor/shame culture such as the first-century Mediterranean world in which this parable was created, an honorable person would not seek more than what was allotted to him, because it meant taking away what belonged to another. Perhaps this is why the master directed his servants to do his dirty work while he was away.

And what about the third servant? This parable appears among a collection of parables about the end time and how we ought to behave as we await the parousia, the return of the risen Christ. In the context of this story, we can imagine that the third servant did what he thought was prudent, especially given his relatively low status in society. He could not afford to lose the money placed in his care, so he buried it for safekeeping. The master's response is fierce and punishing, but it is not for the servant's unwillingness to take risks. Rather, it is because he considered the servant to be

lazy! Perhaps this is the message of this parable. We live in this in-between time still today, waiting for the master to return, and the worst thing we can do is sit around being lazy. What will you do to help advance the coming reign of God until its full glory will be revealed in the end time? C.C.