

A man got angry with God. "God," he said, "I have been praying daily for three years that I should win the national lottery. You told us to ask and we shall receive. How come I never received all these three years I have been asking?" Then he heard the voice of God, loud and clear. "My son," says God. "Please do me a favour. Buy a lottery ticket." This is not supposed to be a promotional for the lottery or any other form of gambling. Rather it illustrates the saying: "You've gotta be in it to win it." There are two kinds of people in our church community: risk-takers and care-takers. The problem with care-takers is that they/we might show up at the Funeral Director's with little to show for the lives they/we have lived. Jesus warns us against this in today's gospel: the Parable of the Talents.

In the parable we hear about "a man going on a journey who summoned his slaves and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability" (Matt 25:15). From the beginning of the story we are told that the servant who received just one talent is a man of little ability. He is not a genius. Yet it is interesting to note that the master has a talent even for his relatively disadvantaged servant. All God's children have got their talents, even those who appear to have very minimal abilities in comparison with the more gifted ones.

The master departs and the first two servants "went off at once and traded" with their talents. The third servant, on the other hand, digs a hole in the ground and buries his one talent. Why does he do that? Because he is afraid he is going to lose it if he trades with it. Perhaps he must reasoned something like this: "Well, those with more talents can afford to take a risk. If they lost a talent, they could make it up later. But me, I have only one talent. If I lose it, end of story! So I better play it safe and just take care of it." Many of us in the church are like this third servant. Because we do not see ourselves as possessing outstanding gifts and talents, we conclude that there is nothing that we do. For instance, do you know someone who loves to sing but who would not join the choir because they are afraid they are not gifted with a golden voice? Or do you know someone who would like to be an evangelist and spread the gospel but is afraid that they do not know enough of the Bible and theology? Neither join the choir or share the Good News. And when people like this end up doing nothing, they are following in the footsteps of the third servant who buried his one talent in the ground.

The surprise in the story comes when the master returns and demands an account from the servants. First, we discover that even though the first servant with five talents had made five more talents and the second servant with two talents had made two more talents, both of them receive exactly the same compliments: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master". They are rewarded not in proportion to how many talents each has made but in proportion to how many talents each of them started off with. Booker T. Washington, an early 20th Century American educator, was right on target when he said

that "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles that one has overcome while trying to succeed."

Of course there are more reasons than one why the third servant decided to hide his talent. Maybe he compared himself to the other servants with more talents, saw himself at the bottom rung of the ladder, and became discouraged. He did not realise that with his one talent, if he made just one more talent, he would have been rewarded just the same as the servant with five talents who made five more. We are not all measured by the same rule. To whom much is given, much is required.

All of us in our Church community have received at least one talent. We have received the gift of faith. Our responsibility as men and women of faith is not just to preserve and "keep" the faith, but to trade with it. We need to sell it to the men and women of our times and promote and add value to faith. That's not to say we need to sell-out on our faith or trade it unwisely so that it loses value but rather that we put ourselves in positions where our works of faith, our commitment to prayer and loving service, are recognised and understood to be conducted because of our fellowship in the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is a venture that brings with it much risk and inconvenience. But, unless we do this, we stand in danger of losing the faith just as the third servant lost his talent. The way to preserve the faith, or any other talent that God has given us, is to put it to work and make it bear fruit.

During this Kingdom Season, when we think of God's saints and holy martyrs, of those whom we love but see no longer, we are reminded that we have inherited our faith from those before us. We are reminded that someone – through acts of kindness, mercy, compassion, and love – taught us the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of their example of faithfulness to Christ – in good times and in bad – and to sharing, investing their talents with those around them. Jesus says "the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few". We each have been entrusted with the seed, the talent, to sow and plant. That seed will bear fruit through God's prompting and by our actions. Like the first and second slaves we may get to see a return on our investment – on new disciples being made – or we may not. But we certainly won't if we don't do anything...if we don't use the seed/talent.

During these days of Lockdown many of our normal ways of effectively witnessing to Christ have been put on hold. But there are other ways: of acts of love and service, of prayer and support, of being 'present' in a virtual or verbal manner. Saying you will pray for someone (and then actually doing so) is perhaps the most effective witness we can offer. Next week the Archbishop's are encouraging us all to take part in a wave of prayer – I hope you will all join in and bring before God, in prayer, all who are in need: the sick and their carers; the grieving and those who have died; our leaders and those who uphold law and order; our community and those who are struggling, faith communities and especially friends in our own Church community we have not seen for a while. If we want to bring about change, you've gotta be in it to win it!