

Sunday Homily

2ND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT

15 NOVEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“For to all those who have, more will be given.”

Matthew 25:29

Illustration

“No gain without pain” is virtually a mantra for those exercising to keep fit or lose weight – watching workout videos, following fitness regimes, jogging. We quickly become aware that the experience is not a comfortable one. We know that we have to expend effort to see results and this is the rock upon which so many of our good intentions founder. “No gain without pain” is a contemporary way of expressing a long-established tradition – the way we now describe “self-discipline”, “willpower” and “application”. To achieve certain objectives we have to make demands on ourselves and on others. As long as these demands are not excessive they can challenge and stretch us, allowing us to achieve even more than we might have dreamed possible.

“No gain without pain” does not mean that anything which happens more easily has no value. It is rather an observation on human life. Many of the worthwhile things in life have to be sought, worked for and repeatedly attempted. They do not happen of their own accord. It is not an absolute truth, however. “Grace” describes those things we receive as gifts, which we have not earned or deserved. The parable of the talents is clearly about responding creatively to a challenge, from God or other people, and acting responsibly.

Gospel Teaching

It sounds very much as though the man who was on his way abroad had a fair idea about the abilities of his servants. He entrusted the most to the servant who, eventually, was able to provide the greatest return. But the challenge was clear: to be a wise steward of the master’s wealth. The master, although keen to increase his fortune, was also encouraging his servants to act responsibly and to use their initiative. As he made demands upon them, he expected them to act wisely and well. The first two are both commended, although one achieved, apparently, more than the other. The point is that they both did their best. The third servant failed in his duty because he refused to make any effort, even the most minimal of putting the money in the bank. There could be no gain, because he would risk no pain.

However, this parable is not simply about using wisely what we have been given. It is about our expectations of one another. The master could have simply banked his money himself, but that would have missed the point. If he had had no expectations of his servants, they would not have been challenged to grow in creativity and responsibility. It was important that the master did not set his sights too low, being satisfied with inactive and immature servants.

This theme has echoes in the second reading, where Paul is urging the Christians of Thessalonica to be prepared for the sudden arrival of the Day of the Lord. If they are to be ready, they must be awake and clear-headed. They cannot risk being caught off guard. Once again, there is no gain without pain. They must be alert while others sleep. But the hardship is not an end in itself; eventually it is for the well-being of those to whom the message is directed – including ourselves.

Application

If we expect little of our fellow human beings, we will seldom be able to see beyond our own poor expectations. If we regard others highly, seeing them as capable of greatness, we give them room to blossom and to grow. Our demands are to be for their good, however, and not simply highlight their failure in order to boost ourselves by comparison. Where we have the genuine interest of others at heart, we do well to expect much, accepting their limitations, but always encouraging growth. Exercising this creative authority is not just for managers and bosses: it is for each and every person to act responsibly with respect for their own life and the lives of others. In doing so we continue to grow into the people God created us to be.

When attempting something worthwhile for the Lord, we may find the going exceptionally tough, but this reminds us of what we will put up with for something we deeply desire. If we cannot put up with even minor hardship, it is clear that we do not want badly enough to achieve our aim. The Gospel of Christ makes demands on us. Not to satisfy an infinitely demanding God, but to challenge us to grow – to grow more like God. And that is worth some pain.