

**FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING - A - 2005**  
***“Stewardship”***

The five foolish virgins ran out of oil, so they were locked out of the wedding hall. *“Lord, Lord,”* they cried, *“open the door for us!”* But the bridegroom responded with the last words those women ever wanted to hear, *“I do not know you.”* The master called the poor guy who buried his one talent out of fear *“wicked”* and *“lazy,”* then had him thrown outside in the darkness where there was a *“wailing and grinding of teeth.”* And now, in today’s gospel, the third one in a row from chapter 25 of St. Matthew, those who didn’t respond to people in need were sent off to eternal punishment. What’s the problem here? Did St. Matthew get up on the wrong side of the bed when he wrote these stories? They don’t have happy endings. I thought the gospel was supposed to be good news. Well, it is for those who hear it and live it. You see, Jesus does not reward irresponsibility. And each of these stories is calling us to be responsible for how we live our lives, for a time will come when we must make an accounting.

When I was first ordained, it was common to hear sermons on hell and punishment. The emphasis was on what happens if you don’t follow Jesus or church law. It was effective, and it kept us in line, well some of us, some of the time. We certainly knew what was expected of us. As a result, the priest was the enforcer of the law and was feared by many. And so was God. God was like a policeman who was checking up on us all the time. We were terribly aware of our weakness and sin, being reminded so often. We wouldn’t think of going to Holy Communion without going to confession first. Then came Vatican II and there was a dramatic shift. Rather than fear, the new emphasis in homilies became love.

A guy once ask me if I believed in the devil. Obviously, this love stuff wasn't registering all that well with him. I said that I believed in Jesus Christ. We were taught by Vatican II to look at Jesus and follow his way. And throughout most of his ministry, we saw how much Jesus loved people and forgave them; how he lifted them up when they were down. And he didn't put people down. He respected them all, even the woman caught in adultery. Nor did he shame anyone. He gave hope to those who didn't have any, and dignity to those who were rejected by society. Jesus only got angry with the self righteous, who claimed, ironically, to be without sin.

You'd think he'd be happy with the sinless, but he knew we all needed God's mercy and love. Yes, we are sinners, but Jesus' focus was not on that. It was on his love for us regardless. Rather than fear of punishment, he invited us to live in his love. He called us to a way of life, one that would be guided by the Holy Spirit of his love. Even in these parables with the bad endings, we can't forget there were five wise virgins, two men doubled their talents and those who responded to the poor were given eternal life. But teaching about love all the time bothered some people. They thought, and in some ways they were right, that this kind of preaching was turning Christianity and Catholicism in particular, into a "feel good" religion.

In the old days, all we had to do was be obedient and do what we were told. Do what father said. And priests, by in large, did a fairly good job of it. Sadly, that approach didn't transform many hearts. And some priests preached about money too much, when the people were hungering for the word of God. When financial campaigns were held, it was not uncommon to list the givers in the bulletin for all to see. It had a way of getting people to give, but oh how they resented it. Some of you remember. Asking for money clearly had little to do with the gospel.

As I ask you to support our parish this second of our stewardship Sundays, I want that support to come from your hearts. I want it to be an expression of your faith. I want it to come out of spirit of generosity and gratitude to God for all God has done for you. I want it to be as much a part of your faith life as saying the Lord's Prayer or receiving Holy Communion. I believe it has as much to do with the gospel as loving our neighbor, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry and proclaiming the good news. I do believe that everything is gift, and we are stewards of the gifts that God has given us. And the way we use those gifts, our time, talent and treasure, should reflect gospel values. Those who designed this year's campaign are asking parishes to publish the names of those who sign pledge cards as a way to encourage more people to do so. But, in conversation with our Finance Committee, we decided not to do it. Maybe we would get more pledge cards, but at what cost? To my mind, it smacks too much of shaming some of you into giving, and I have no right to shame anybody. Besides, I don't think that is a good way to treat adults like adults.

Whenever we've talked about money in this parish, I have always said that if we have money problems, our problem isn't money. I've appealed to your faith, and I do so again today. I hope you read the letter I sent to you this past week. Some of you are blessed financially, and can do more than others. But I think we can all do something.

The theme of the Stewardship campaign this year is, "***God Owns It All.***" That isn't bad when we remember that this is the Feast of Christ the King. I heard someone say recently. "***If the Lord isn't the Lord of all, he isn't the Lord at all.***" When Jesus reigns in our hearts, then we know that everything belongs to God and we are simply stewards of his gifts. It is

good to know who is the owner. Let me share a modern parable that makes the point.

## PARABLE OF THE COOKIES

It happened that a wealthy woman found herself with time to spare in London's Heathrow Airport. She bought a newspaper, a cup of coffee and a small bag of cookies. She staggered with her purse, her carry-on and her purchases to an unoccupied table. She began reading when she became aware that a shabbily dressed man seated himself at her table.

He took a cookie and ate it. She was appalled but she did not want to make a scene, so she just reached for a cookie herself. A minute or so passed. More rustling. He helped himself to another cookie. She couldn't believe it, so she did the same. The back and forth continued until they were down to the last cookie.

She was very angry, but still her refinement would not allow her to say anything. Then the man broke the remaining cookie in two, pushed half across to her, ate the other half and left. She was flabbergasted.

A moment later, they announced her flight departure. She reached down to her handbag to get her ticket and there was confronted with her little bag of cookies, unopened on top of her purse. She had been eating his cookies all along!

It's good to know who owns the stuff of our lives. It's all gift. We are stewards . . . only stewards!

*Fill out cards.*

P.S. I woke up yesterday and a prayer came to my mind. It surprised me. I knew it was to a very busy day, with a funeral, first confessions, Mass and the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mothers and Others. I'd usually ask, "*Lord help me with this and that.*" Instead, I prayed a prayer I had heard on retreat a couple of years ago. "*Lord, how may I help you today?*" It may be a good prayer for us to say today.