

## Proper 28A

St Mark's, Tampa

16 November 2008

✠ **I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

When I first started the discernment process for the priesthood, I had to take a battery of psychological tests. One of them was the MMPI, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. Some of you have probably taken this test. In the version I took, it's 567 true-false questions. The questions are about everything you can think of. Now giving a psychological test to a philosophy professor is probably a lost cause, because we start analyzing and theorizing and questioning the questions. I certainly had that experience. One thing I noticed was that there were a lot of what I called "religious nut" questions. These were questions that – at least this was my theory – were designed to identify people whose religious belief was a tad on the unhealthy side.

The religious nut questions made me nervous, because I was a little skittish that on some of them, the honest answer was not the answer that the developers of the test thought was healthy and normal. I was particularly skittish about this one: I believe in the second coming of Christ.

Well, because I'm more or less honest, I marked that one "True," even though I felt pretty sure that only religious nuts were supposed to mark it true. But you know, I do believe in the second coming of Christ. It's in the Creed: "He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

Notice that: not just he will come again, but he will come again to *judge*.

You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them.

Throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If I believe, as I profess every Sunday, that Jesus will come again to judge, then I have to wrestle with these passages and come to grips with what they mean.

Let me start with the Epistle. Saint Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.” I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have started off so confidently if this were the Epistle to the Americans, because a lot of us do need to have something written to us about the times and the seasons. We’re very big on people claiming to know exactly when Jesus is coming back, or reading the Book of Revelation as a divine code message about just how the day of the Lord is going to come. Well I’m here to tell you that the *Left Behind* books are about as Scriptural as *Gone With the Wind*. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night,” and thieves don’t generally leave you detailed instructions about when and how they’re coming.

The Thessalonians knew, Paul says, that the day of the Lord would come suddenly and without warning. And the only way to be ready for a sudden and unexpected event is to be *always* ready, to be *always* on alert, to be *awake*, as Paul puts it:

you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

I don’t want to fall into the trap of saying that we are meant to live in constant expectation of the sudden coming of the Lord. I’ve heard lots of sermons like that around this time of the liturgical year, and they sound good while you’re listening to them, but let’s be honest. No one can actually sustain that attitude of expectation indefinitely. You can’t actually be on perpetual hair-trigger alert. The Christian life is not like some stupid horror movie where you’re constantly uneasy because at any moment Jesus might pop out at you from behind a cloud.

The Gospel makes this very clear. Who is the one person in the parable who is perpetually on edge about the return of the master? It’s the “wicked and lazy slave”:

Master, [he says,] I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.

Not the example we're supposed to follow, obviously. The good and trustworthy slaves – sorry, I just hate that; let's go back to the King James Version and call them the good and faithful servants – they were ready for the coming of the master, not because they had worked themselves up into an emotional state, but because they were faithfully using the enormous resources that the master had given over to their care.

And so for them, the return of the master was not something to dread, but something to look forward to. Their judge pronounced a good and gracious verdict: "Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master."

That's what the master, the judge, wants for us, his servants: to enter into his joy. And he entrusts us with enormous resources and asks of us simply that we use them and make them fruitful.

And how I would like to stop there, with grace and joy and "the sweet well done in judgment hour." But we still have to wrestle with the master's harsh judgment on the wicked and lazy slave. The same judge who says "Enter into the joy of your master" also says "throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." If I believe, as I profess every Sunday, that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, then I'd better try to come to grips with that kind of judgment too.

One striking thing about the parable of the talents is that the master is gone for a long time. We know this in part because the parable actually says "After a long time the master . . . came and settled accounts." But we also know it because it takes a while to double an investment, and that's what the two good and faithful servants managed to do. So we are to imagine that during all this time, while the two good and faithful servants are doing their best with the master's gift, the wicked and lazy slave is doing what, exactly? *Nothing*. Day after day, nothing. And during all that time, did he come across any opportunities to do something with the talent he had buried? He must have. Did he see his fellow servants showing how much could be accomplished with the master's generous gifts? He must have. And at every opportunity, he said no.

Now imagine that. Day after day, no. No to blessing, no to opportunity, no to work, no to the master's business. There comes a point, after saying no so many times, after refusing blessing for so long, that the heart is hardened and it becomes impossible to say yes. The good things that the master offers come to be hateful to him, every gift is a poison and every opportunity a snare, and the servant walls himself about with fear and rejection and isolation. So when the master comes, there is nothing left for him to do but to ratify the judgment that this wicked and lazy slave has already passed against himself, to consign him to a darkness of his own making.

We would never be that bad, would we? But day by day the opportunities come, and we say no: no to using the talents we've been given, no to cultivating a difficult virtue, no to loving our neighbor as ourselves. And then suddenly, like a thief in the night, the moment of judgment comes. We have been careless about truthfulness, and when the moment comes to own up to a difficult truth, we find we can't, and we fall back on a lie. We have let a talent wither, and when the moment comes when that talent could have made all the difference, we find that we are useless. We have hidden away in our own concerns, and when the moment comes to be moved to action by the suffering of a neighbor, we find that our hearts are hard and our affections sluggish.

These too are judgments. The master comes as judge, not only at the end of the age, not only at the end of our lives, but whenever we are put to the test, when he comes to settle accounts with us and see what use we have made of the generous, the extravagant gifts that he has given over to our care.

If anything is clear from our readings today, it is that our judge does not want to cast us into outer darkness. He does not want to ratify a condemnation that we have pronounced against ourselves. He wants us to enter into his joy. He wants us to use those talents – that's why he gave them to us. He wants to say "Well done, thou good and faithful servant":

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

So let us live in a way that is worthy of so kind a judge, so great a redeemer, to whom, with the Father and Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. Amen.