

The Parable of the Talents: investing in faithfulness

Matthew 25:14-30

St Alphonsus Rodríguez, is the Patron Saint of the Catholic Jesuit brothers, who worked as the porter of the Jesuit college in Palma de Maiorca where his saintly life involved doing simple repetitive manual jobs. Having married at the age of 26, he fathered three children; but within five years, his wife and two of his children had died. When his third child died, he decided to consider life in a religious order.

He considered the Jesuits but his lack of education and his poor health delayed his entry into the Society of Jesus until 1571 when he was 40 years old. It is claimed that the provincial at the time said that if Alphonsus was not qualified to become a brother or a priest, he could enter to become a saint.

For his probation as a novice, Alphonsus was sent to the recently founded Montesione College on Majorca, where he remained in the humble position of porter for 46 years. There he served not only the community but also the great number of people who came to the porter's lodge for advice and direction. As doorkeeper, his duties were to receive visitors who came to the college, to show them to the parlour where they were to meet their Jesuit spiritual directors, deliver messages and run errands. His duties also included comforting the sick – both physically and spiritually - and distributing alms to the needy.

Alphonsus says that each time the bell rang, he looked at the door and imagined that it was God who was standing outside seeking admittance. In his memoirs, he said he answered the door with the words: 'I'm coming, Lord'

In 1585, Alphonsus made his final vows as a brother, at the age of 54. Throughout his ministry in Majorca, he committed himself unreservedly to good works, showing absolute obedience and faithfulness to his vocation of service – even in the most menial of duties. Despite his personal troubles and trials, he adhered to a few simple spiritual guidelines that helped him navigate through life, principally, the imitation of Christ. *"I put myself in spirit before our crucified Lord,"* he wrote, *"looking at him full of sorrow, shedding his blood and bearing great bodily hardships*

for me. As love is paid for in love, I must imitate him, sharing in spirit all his sufferings. I must consider how much I owe him and what he has done for me. Putting these sufferings between God and my soul, I must say, 'What does it matter, my God, that I should endure for your love these small hardships? For you, Lord, endured so many great hardships for me.' "Amid the hardship and trial itself, I stimulate my heart with this exercise. Thus, I encourage myself to endure for love of the Lord who is before me, until I make what is bitter sweet. In this way learning from Christ our Lord, I take and convert the sweet into bitter, renouncing myself and all earthly and carnal pleasures, delights and honours of this life, so that my whole heart is centred solely on God."

This morning we heard read the Parable of the Talents. St Matthew has 5 discourses in his gospel (5 long bodies of teaching) of which The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) is the first, and the final block of teaching is what we know as the eschatological discourse (teaching on the future and end of the age), found in chapters 24-25. Chapter 24 has a shorter future trajectory - the destruction of the temple in AD70 - and chapter 25 has a longer trajectory to the end of the age and the second coming of Jesus Christ - what St Paul describes as the Blessed Hope.

The parable of the talents is one of three parables in this chapter that speak of living faithfully in the light of the return of God.

The parable is not about how *successful* we are, how well we play the capitalist system, it's about how *faithful* we are. It seeks to show that faithfulness increases faithfulness. When the master returns he doesn't commend his servants for their success, for their business acumen, for their wise investment in the first century equivalent of the FTSE100, no he commends them for their faithfulness. The NRSV uses the word 'trustworthy' translating the Greek *pistos*, faith or faithfulness. Living in and living out the kingdom of God, is what defines our faithfulness: forgiving our enemies, not worrying about the future but living one day at a time, not worshipping money and all it provides - seeking the kingdom first, being characterised by the fruit of the Spirit (the character of Jesus, love joy, peace, long-suffering, and so on), having a heart for the poor, having a passion for justice, caring for God's good earth. Living with integrity.

The master makes no distinction between the holder of 5 talents and the holder of 2 talents. Again it wasn't their success that was commended but their faithfulness. One talent was 20 years pay for a day labourer, so the servants were given the rich resources of the kingdom. The servant who was given 1 talent didn't live out the kingdom and was unfaithful and self centred, and self serving - and worse had a distorted view of the character of the master - the character of God.

God calls us to be faithful in the midst of a sometimes hostile and self centred wider culture. God calls us to invest big in the kingdom, invest big in the values of the kingdom, invest big in God's love; to share the life of the kingdom and receive the joy of big returns seen in women and men liberated by God's love and grace.

And may we be faithful, like St Alphonsus Rodríguez, who when there was a knock on the door of his monastery, he ran to welcome with the words, 'I'm coming Lord', God's faithful doorkeeper.