

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for the home*  
*November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017 - 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matthew 23:1-12*

At times Jesus uses what scholars call "reversal language." Today's gospel is a good example of this. If you want to be first, then, take the last place. If you want to be a true leader, then serve everyone. This certainly sounds like a reversal of what most would think about the correct order of things.

In today's competitive society, most seem to want to be first, to be given top-billing, recognition, privileges, a first-class seat. Most people would say that they would rather lead than follow.

All of which makes us think that not many people would have liked what Jesus said in today's gospel. Jesus recommends being humble. Years ago, I learned that the virtue of humility is the virtue of truth. Being humble means accepting ourselves as we are.

If we think that we are above others, or are always trying to move ourselves ahead of others, it's unlikely that we would want to help them. Many would not applaud the words of Jesus that the greatest among us will be the servant of all.

In today's gospel Jesus describes two types of people. Those who are *always* wanting to be considered the best (in their eyes and the eyes others) and those who are content with being who they are. The proud and the humble. For Jesus, the only one is to be thought of as "best" is God.

In purely human terms, people are classified according to a kind of ranking system. That's okay. But when God is added to the mix, God should be placed on top with the rest of us equally (that's important too) positioned below God. Jesus is saying that because God equally loves every one of us, that's enough. We are all "privileged" by God's love. There is no need for us to seek "a higher place."

Good parents and good friends know this. They value others - children - grandchildren - friends -- neighbors and they are willing to serve others when need presents itself. Serving or helping others is never "beneath" them. Jesus often angered those in authority because he valued *everyone* and treated *everyone* as deserving his attention and assistance. He asks us to do the same.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for the home*  
*November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matthew 25:1-13*

The Boy Scouts of America were recently in the news because they are soon to allow girls into their organization. But that's not what we are going to discuss here. Rather, we are going to discuss what may be the most remembered motto of the boy scouts. "Be prepared." That's at the heart of the parable Jesus taught about the Wise Virgins.

To more fully understand this parable, it's helpful to know a little about wedding celebrations at the time of Jesus. If it could be afforded, they were large celebrations, sometimes lasting days. Food and drink were provided (recall the wedding feast at Cana when Jesus, at the request of his mother, helped keep that feast going).

And there were rules for wedding feasts. One was that once the feast began, no one was admitted who was not already inside. Sort of like coming in a few minutes late for a symphony concert. You are kept outside until there's a break in the performance. Well, at a wedding feast, there was no break. If you were late, too bad.

The gospels often use examples drawn from wedding feasts to explain the arrival of the Kingdom of God because they were well known by all. They were wonderful events. In today's gospel the focus is on being "ready to go" when entry to the feast is possible. Be prepared! Have your light lit, which is a way of saying "keep your eyes open."

Entrance into God's Kingdom is a personal matter. When God's invitation arrives, we are advised to be ready. Sometimes the invitation is called "grace" from God. That grace can come at any time. It is often wrapped in an opportunity to serve the need of another person. A child is suddenly frightened and the parent steps in to assure the child that everything is all right. A teen is down because of a poor grade on a test. A friend reassures and consoles the temporarily defeated student. A grandparent feels lonely until a daughter calls from across the country to see "how mom is doing." These are very ordinary acts of kindness, but they can also be a response to an invitation to enter God's Kingdom – at least for a while. So, be prepared for that invitation to the wedding banquet. It may come later today.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for the home*  
*November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – 33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matthew 25:14-30*

"Use it or lose it!" I am not sure where this saying originated but it could have been drawn from today's gospel. It's one that is familiar to most of us. Mention "the parable of the talents" and many will recall it. It is especially popular with accountants and financial managers. It touches on the world of investments and taking risks. It may even appeal to gamblers, now that I think of it.

It's a story of success and failure. To those who used the talents given to them by God, especially "for others," their goodness (and reward) doubled. To those who buried their talent and failed to use it for others, they lost it all. Know that this is not a numbers game although Jesus uses numbers to make his point. It's about giving and taking. The "givers" are abundantly rewarded for their actions, but for those who take what's given them and don't use it ("bury it" in this parable), all is lost.

"Using one's talents" in the gospels involves letting go of what you have. You give it away. It is like the act of love, which basically means the giving of yourself for another. Jesus came to us as one who was set on giving his life for us. He held nothing back. He has been described as "the one for others." All his life was devoted to helping others.

Saints, both those beyond and those among us, do the same thing. They take the talents given to them by God and they spend those talents on helping others. Rather than putting their talents in the bank, they give them away to those in need. Careful financial advisors may consider this overly risky, even foolhardy, but in God's world, this is, in a sense, financial wisdom. A great investment!

Giving it away (whatever "it" may mean - a good example might be the time and attention you give to someone who is lonely or discouraged) can at times feel like a loss. We are saturated with messages in our culture to be good to ourselves, to put ourselves first, to take care of "number one." But that's not the rule of life in the gospels. Jesus says in another place that it is in giving that we receive. That may not make sense in the world of financial planning, but it makes great sense in God's Kingdom of love.

David M. Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel meditation for the home*  
*November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – Jesus Christ, King of the Universe*  
*Matthew 25:31-46*

One of our sons recently told me that he was interested in becoming a football referee. He was disgusted with what he called "terrible officiating" that he witnessed as a fan. As he saw it, the players and the fans deserved better. Accurate judgment on the part of umpires and referees is an important part of the world of sports. Nothing angers a fan more than "a bad call."

In today's gospel we are given the rules that will be applied to what we might call "the final game!" It's also called "the Last Judgment." It's worth our close attention because we will be among those judged.

The scene is memorable. All those who ever lived are gathered in one place where the King will give a judgment as to who will enter the Kingdom of God that will last forever. The terms of judgment are quite surprising. In a sense, they relate to everything that was done during the lifetime of all those gathered. What might be most surprising is that the criteria of judgment mentioned nothing about religious activity, but focused rather on social actions.

And those actions seemingly may not have been thought about as that important. Like feeding the hungry, giving a drink to a thirsty person, providing clothing to someone who needed it, visiting the lonely and imprisoned, welcoming strangers. Many of these actions happen in some form every day, especially in families.

The "punch line" is one that makes most of us squirm. When you did any of these kinds of action to even the least among you, you did it to me. And who's the "me" being referred to? It's the judge, the Son of Man (a biblical reference to the Messiah, Jesus Christ). It's God! Not surprisingly, no one seemed aware of this. Some were surprised and delighted to learn this while some were devastated because they often ignored those in need.

One of the take-aways from this description of the Last Judgment is that the game of life is always on. There are no time-outs or even two-minute warnings. And that even the smallest play can be very important in determining the final outcome.

David M. Thomas, PhD