

Let us now consider the parable of the man who ‘went on his travels; he summoned his servants and entrusted his goods to them’. Each one is given a different amount to administer in his master’s absence. I think it is appropriate here to consider how the man who accepted the one talent behaved. He acted in a way which in my part of the world we’d call ‘playing the cuckoo’. His petty mind thinks and wonders, then is made up: ‘he went off and made a hole in the ground, and there hid his master’s money’.

What kind of work can our man undertake henceforth, now that he has given up the very tools of his trade? He has opted irresponsibly for the easy way out. He will simply give back what he has received. From now on he will just kill time, minutes, hours, days, months, years, his whole life! The others meanwhile are busy trading. They are noble fellows and keen to give back more than they have received, for the master has a right to expect a profit. His instructions had been very clear: *negotiamini dum venio*; look after the business and make it yield a profit, until the owner returns. Not so our man, and thus his whole life becomes useless.

What a shame it would be to have as one’s occupation in life that of killing time which is a God-given treasure! No excuse could justify such behaviour. ‘Let no one say, “I only have one talent, I can’t do anything.” Even with just one talent you can act in a meritorious way.’ How sad not to turn to good account and obtain a real profit from the few or many talents that God has given to each man so that he may dedicate himself to the task of serving other souls and the whole of society!

When a Christian kills time on this earth, he is putting himself in danger of ‘killing Heaven’ for himself, that is, if through selfishness, he backs out of things and hides away and doesn’t care. A person who loves God not only hands over to the service of Christ, what he has and what he is in life. He gives his very self. He is not small-minded. He does not see himself in his health, in his good name, or in his career.

‘Mine, mine, mine,’ is the way many people think and talk and act. How unpleasant an attitude this is! St Jerome comments that, ‘truly the words of Scripture, “to seek excuses for sins” (Ps 140:4) are fulfilled by those people who, apart from having the sin of pride, are also lazy and careless.’

It is pride that constantly makes people think: ‘mine, mine, mine’. It is a vice that makes men sterile and fruitless. It destroys their keenness to work for God and leads them to waste their time. As for you, don’t lose your effectiveness; instead, trample on your selfishness. You think your life is for yourself? Your life is for God, for the good of all men, through your love for Our Lord. Your buried talent, dig it up again! Make it yield, and you will taste the joy of knowing that in this supernatural business it does not matter if in this world the results are not wonders that men can admire. What really matters is to hand over all that we are and all that we have, striving to make our talent yield, and constantly exerting ourselves in order to produce good fruit.

God may have given us just one more year in which to serve him. Don't think of five, or even two. Just concentrate on this one year, that has just started. Give it to God, don't bury it! This is the resolution we ought to make.

'There was a rich man who planted a vineyard; he walled it in, and dug a wine-press and built a tower in it, and then let it out to some vinedressers, while he went on his travels.'

I would like you to meditate with me on what this parable teaches, bearing in mind the points we are interested in now. This story has traditionally been seen to refer to the destiny of God's chosen people, above all pointing out how we human beings respond with unfaithfulness and ingratitude to so much love on God's part.

In particular I should like to concentrate on the phrase 'he went on his travels'. I come immediately to the conclusion that we Christians must not abandon the vineyard where God has placed us. We must direct our energies to the work before us, within these walls, toiling in the wine-press. And then taking our rest in the tower when our day's work is over. If we were to give in to comfort, it would be like telling Jesus, 'Look, my time is mine, not yours. I don't want to tie myself down to looking after your vineyard.'

Our Lord has given us as a present our very lives, our senses, our faculties, and countless graces. We have no right to forget that each of us is a worker, one among many, on this plantation where He has placed us to cooperate in the task of providing food for others. This is our place, here within the boundaries of this plantation. Here is where we have to toil away each day with Jesus, helping him in his work of redemption.

Allow me to insist. You think your time is for yourself? Your time is for God! It may well be that, by God's mercy, such selfish thoughts have never entered into your mind. I'm telling you these things in case you ever find your heart wavering in its faith in Christ. Should that happen, I ask you — God asks you — to be true to your commitments, to conquer your pride, to control your imagination, not to be superficial and run away, not to desert.

The workers in the marketplace had all day to spare. The one who buried his talent wanted to kill the passing hours. The one who should have been looking after the vineyard went off elsewhere. They all prove insensitive to the great task the Master has entrusted to each and every Christian, that of seeing ourselves as his instruments, and acting accordingly, so that we may co-redeem with him, and of offering up our entire lives in the joyful sacrifice of surrendering ourselves for the good of souls.

Again it is St Matthew who tells us that Jesus felt hungry one day on his way back from Bethany. I am always deeply moved by the example of Our Lord, and especially when I see that as well as being perfect God he is true and perfect Man, and as such teaches us to make use even of our frailty and our own natural weaknesses, and to offer ourselves completely, just as we are, to the Father, who will gladly accept our holocaust.

He was hungry. The Maker of the universe, the Lord of all creation, experiences hunger!

Thank you, Lord, for inspiring the sacred author to include this small touch here, a detail that makes me love you more and which encourages me to desire ardently to contemplate your sacred Humanity! Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo, perfect God and perfect Man, of flesh and bone, just like you and I.

Jesus had worked hard the previous day, so when he set off once more on his way he felt hungry. Moved by his need, he goes up to a fig tree which, from a distance, boasts a magnificent foliage. St Mark tells us that 'it was not the season for figs', but Our Lord comes to pick them, knowing full well that he won't find any at this time of year. However, when the tree proves to be barren in spite of its apparent fertility and luxuriant leaves, Jesus commands, 'Let no man ever eat fruit of yours hereafter.'

Hard words, indeed! May you never more bear fruit! How must the disciples have felt, especially if they considered that it was the Wisdom of God who had thus spoken? Jesus curses the fig tree because in it he has found only the appearance of fruitfulness — many leaves. Let this be a lesson to us. There is no excuse for being unproductive. Some might say 'I don't know enough...' But that is no excuse. Or else, 'I am unwell, I haven't much talent, the conditions are not right, my surroundings...' These aren't excuses either. How pitiful the man who adorns himself with the foliage of a false apostolate, who has all the outward appearance of leading a fruitful life, but is not sincerely attempting to yield fruit! It looks as though he is using his time well. He seems to get around, to organise things, to be inventing new ways of solving all kinds of problems... but he has nothing to show for his efforts. No one will benefit from his works if they have no supernatural content.

Let us ask Our Lord that we may be souls who are ready to work with a heroism that proves fruitful. For there is no lack of people here on earth who, on being approached, turn out to be nothing but large, shiny, glossy leaves. Foliage, just foliage and nothing more. Meanwhile, many souls are looking to us hoping to satisfy their hunger, which is a hunger for God. We must not forget that we have all the means we need. We have sufficient doctrine and the grace of God, in spite of our wretchedness.

I'd like to remind you once more that we don't have much time left, tempus breve est, because life on earth is short, and also that, since we have the means, all that's needed is our good will to make use of the opportunities that God grants us. From the moment that Our Lord came into this world, 'the acceptable time, the day of salvation' commenced for us and for all men. May Our Father God never have to cast upon us the reproach he spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, 'the kite, circling in the air, knows its time; turtledove can guess, and swallow, and stork, when they should return; only for my people the divine appointment passes unobserved'.

There are no bad or inopportune days. All days are good, for serving God. Days become bad only when men spoil them with their lack of faith, their laziness and their indolence, which turns them away from working with God and for God. 'At all times I will bless the Lord.' Time is a treasure that melts away. It escapes from us, slipping through our fingers like water through the mountain rocks. Tomorrow will soon be another yesterday. Our lives are so very short. Yesterday has gone and today is passing by. But what a great deal can be

done for the love of God in this short space of time!

No excuses will do us any good. Our Lord has been very generous with us, He has instructed us patiently. He has explained his precepts to us through parables. He has insisted tirelessly. As with Philip, he could ask us, 'here am I, who have been all this while in your company; have you not learned to recognise me yet?' The time has now come for us to get down to hard work, filling each moment of the day and bearing, willingly and joyfully, 'the day's burden and the heat'.

There's a passage in St Luke's gospel, chapter two, which I think will help us to finish off well what we have been reflecting on today. In this passage Christ is a child. How his Mother and St Joseph must have suffered when, on their way back from Jerusalem, they could not find him among their relatives and friends. And then what joy when they recognise him from afar, as he instructs the teachers of Israel. But notice the words that issue from his lips. Don't they seem hard? The Son says in reply to his Mother, 'How is it that you sought me?'

Surely they were right to have looked for him? Souls who know what it is to lose Jesus Christ and to find him again, are able to understand this... 'How is it that you sought me? Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?' Didn't you know that I must devote my time entirely to my heavenly Father?

The fruit of our prayer today should be the conviction that our journey on earth, at all times and whatever the circumstances, is for God; that it is a treasure of glory, a foretaste of heaven, something marvellous, which has been entrusted to us to administer, with a sense of responsibility, being answerable both to men and to God. But it is not necessary for us to change our situation in life. Right in the middle of the world we can sanctify our profession or job, our home life, and social relations — in fact all those things that seem to have only a worldly significance.

When at the age of twenty-six I perceived the full depth of what it meant to serve Our Lord in Opus Dei, I asked with all my heart to be granted the maturity of an eighty year old man. I asked my God, with the childlike simplicity of a beginner, to make me older, so that I would know how to use my time well and learn how to make the best use of every minute, in order to serve him. Our Lord knows how to grant these riches. Perhaps the time will come when you and I will be able to say, 'I have understood more than the elders, because I have fulfilled your commandments.' Youth need not imply thoughtlessness, just as having grey hair does not necessarily mean that a person is prudent and wise.

Come with me to Mary, the Mother of Christ. You, who are our Mother and have seen Jesus grow up and make good use of the time he spent among men, teach me how to spend my days serving the Church and all mankind. My good Mother, teach me, whenever necessary, to hear in the depths of my heart, as a gentle reproach, that my time is not my own, because it belongs to Our Father who is in Heaven.