

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

A story is told of Alexander the Great on his deathbed. Knowing he was going to die, he made three requests to his generals, firstly that only his doctors should carry his coffin, secondly that the path of the funeral procession be strewn with gold, silver and precious stones from his treasury and thirdly that his hands be left dangling out of his coffin. The generals were confused by his three requests: promising to obey his commands they asked him why. Alexander told them,

I want my doctors to carry my coffin because people should realise that no doctor on this earth can really cure any body. They are powerless and cannot save a person from the clutches of death. So let not people take life for granted.

The second wish of strewing gold, silver and other riches on the path to the graveyard is to tell people that not even a fraction of gold will come with me. I spent all my life earning riches but cannot take anything with me. Let people realise that it is a sheer waste of time to chase wealth.

About my third wish of having my hands dangling out of the coffin, I wish people to know that I came empty handed into this world and empty handed I go out of this world.

Ultimately we all know these truths, our wider society knows these truths though they may be unwilling to admit them. Like Alexander, no doctor can promise us immortality, no wealth can follow us into the grave, we enter the world empty-handed and we will leave in the same manner. These truths, realised by a pagan before the birth of Christ, are universal.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, unless the Lord comes first, we are all going to die. Except, unlike Alexander, God has revealed to us a greater truth; we are created in the image and after the likeness of God and the image cannot be wiped out nor destroyed: we are created to be immortal. And it is in Christ that the words of the Psalmist are explained: "You are gods," cries out King David, "and you are all sons of the Most High. But you die like men, and like one of the rulers you fall." We will "die like men" but in Christ we will rise.

What will we say to the Lord on that last day, the Day of Judgement, when the Lord wants to settle accounts? What have we to offer the Lord? What have we done with the talents he has invested in us? We will die, like Alexander, with nothing yet the Lord expects us to make a return.

Today's reading comes from the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel and it is worth reading in its entirety. It is part of the extended discourse given by the Lord in the days after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which begins Holy and Great Week and the days of our salvation. The chapter starts with the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise and the remainder foolish, and then today's Parable of the Talents followed by the Parable of the Last Judgement where the sheep and the goats are divided. Each tells us something of the Kingdom and our entry into it.

“A man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.” In each man, my brothers and sisters, investment is made; in each of us, too, the Lord has made investment: each in a different measure, each according to ability. Our first task, then, is to recognise the talents we have been given. All of us here in this Church do not deserve what we have been given: we have been brought up by parents, by schools, by society and given opportunities whether we deserve them or not. Some of us – many of us! – have made use of them and built on them, we have applied ourselves to learning, to adapting, to creating, to training, to discerning yet the initial investment was not ours.

How tempting it is to offer back to our initial investor what has been invested but keep the profits for ourselves? “This profit is down to me!” we delude ourselves, “It is mine, I will keep it.” Do we recognise that talents have been invested in us without our deserving them? Do we recognise that the Lord continues to invest in us, building on the work we have done?

The first and second servants began to trade with their talents and made increase, each according to the investment in which he has been trusted, yet the third did not. The third trusted only in what is worldly, and invested his money literally in the earth. From the parable it is clear that the profit the landowner expects of the third is not the same as of the first – to the first and the second, despite the differing investment and return, he says, “you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much,” – but he does expect work to be done, profit to be made.

What does this mean, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for us? How are we to live our lives in the light of today’s reading? We have seen already that we need to recognise all our talents – our money but also our abilities, our resources – as coming from another, from God, but how are we to invest them so that we can make a faithful return to the Lord?

Firstly, all we have – from the clothes on our back to the money in our bank, from our home and food to the air we breathe – belongs to God. And as it belongs to God we need to be faithful stewards of it. How much more, my brothers and sisters, do we pay attention not to waste what we perceive to be ours? We seek out value for our “own” money – to go further, to buy more – but we do not apply this economy to our talents and what, in truth, belongs to God. So, our second point, once we have recognised God as the owner of all we have, is to apply economy to our talents. And what are our talents? Money yes, but also our abilities, our strengths, our weaknesses too. Can we make them go further?

What are we to do? We are to offer all we have to the glory of God! Some may answer – and with some justification perhaps, at least in a worldly sense – that they cannot offer all their money, all their time, all their abilities to the Church but this is not necessarily what we are talking about. Yes, we need to pay rent or mortgage on a home, pay for heating and light, but when that home is a place where God is blessed and where the stranger is welcomed then it is to the glory of God. Yes we must buy food, but that food can be offered to feed the hungry. So our commitment to the Church is not measured by our efforts solely on a Sunday morning but by the totality of our lives: “I am a Christian” means “I make my life a continual glorification of God.” Before the followers of Christ were called Christians, they were known as those who followed the Way: not as a set of

beliefs which we must hold but a way of life. We, too, are to live in this manner: we are Christians not only because of what is in our mind but because of how we live our lives.

Can we do more? Yes! What we invest our time, our money and our talents in shows all what we love. Look at the bank statement and diary of a football supporter and we will see how much of his life is dedicated to football: from buying the latest shirt to attending matches his "liturgy" is expressed in what he does. Someone who loves reading books will spend time and money going to purchase them and reading them, voraciously even, perhaps spending hours in a library. Our money, our time, our efforts demonstrate what we love, what we value, what we hold dear.

Do God and his Church hold a place of honour in your life? God has invested in you – everything you have is his – do you return that investment? Do I? Would our bank accounts, our diaries, demonstrate to a judge our love of God and his Church?

What should you do? Pray to God. Prayer is the mark of a Christian. To pray is to accept your place as a creature of your Creator, to open your heart to the Lord that he may enter and make it his dwelling place. And act on your prayer: offer to God through his Church a portion, a part, of all he has freely given to you. Offer to God, too, through the poor a portion of what he has freely given. Offer to the Church your money, regular and proportional giving, your time, through attending services, through regular prayer and study of Scriptures, each according to the investment of talents God has made, so that your heart may be opened to God. Let this coming Lent, the Great Fast, be the time for trading in the talents we have received as we prepare for the Great Feast of the Lord's Pascha: commit to persevere throughout the year. Can you welcome, sing, clean, serve, drive, teach, paint, build, repair, organise, visit, comfort, cook, listen, tidy, monitor, respond, prepare, edit or perform any other skill? Then offer it to the Lord and his Church. Encourage each other, support each other, on this path that we may combine our efforts and give back a greater return.

Like Alexander the Great, no amount of efforts can keep us from death nor allow us to take our wealth with us: yet we can make a return on the investment of talents given to us from God. That, at the last day, Christ will say to each one of us, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master."

To whom belongs all glory, and whom we praise, honour and worship, together with his unoriginate Father and the all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit. Amen.