

Sermon for 3 October 2010  
19 Pentecost; Proper 22, Year C

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

There is, I think, a spirit in every generation, which carries along with it the possibility for great triumphs and also some remarkable flaws. Even what Tom Brokaw called "The Greatest Generation", the generation of my grandparents, had its "blind spots". This week's Gospel reading reminds me of perhaps the greatest "blind spot" of my own generation, the so-called "millennials", who were born somewhere between 1982 and 1995.

A couple of years ago, right before the economic crisis hit, I read a piece which suggested that employers were having an awfully hard time with the "millennials" as they began to enter the workforce. The problem was that this generation (my generation) tended to have unreasonable expectations with regard to what rewards they were

owed. Having grown up with a largely optimistic message from their baby-boomer parents, the millennials expected that they deserved raises and promotions and every other form of affirmation based solely on having done their job; and they wanted such benefits rather quickly. Thus, employers had to spend a great deal of time and energy to communicate a message which seemed to them rather obvious: namely, that these young employees ought not to expect immediate reward for simply having done the job entrusted to them. Rewards would come later, and slowly, and commitment *over time* was expected.

I guess I should be relieved that this sort of presumption is not only a pitfall for my generation. Something like it was obviously a problem in Jesus' day, and even with his own disciples. Hear again his words to them in this morning's Gospel:

Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, `Come at

once and sit down at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'

The disciples expected some kind of affirmation, some kind of reward for doing their work, and Jesus tells them something that one might think to have been obvious: namely, that these young disciples ought not to expect immediate reward for simply having done the job entrusted to them. Rewards would come later, and slowly, and commitment *over time* was expected.

Well, maybe it's not all that obvious. If one were to turn the television to one of the televangelist stations, one would be likely to find quite the opposite message. Proponents of the so-called "prosperity gospel"—Benny Hinn, the unfortunately (though, perhaps, aptly) named Creflo Dollar, and the now controversial Eddie Long to

name but three—have preached a message that might easily fit the expectations of millennial employees or Jesus' disciples. "Claim-it and take-it"; "plant your seed and reap the harvest"; "have faith and you'll be rewarded health and wealth in this life." It sounds great, but the problem is, that's not how it works.

And thank heavens it doesn't work that way. If our weal in this life is contingent on our faith, our woe must imply a remarkable lack of faith. What of all the healthy, wealthy irreligious people? What of all the sick and impoverished Christians, who now that the powerbase of Christianity has shifted from Europe and North America to the Global South, make up the majority of our co-religionists? The prosperity gospel leads us to an elitist and (quite honestly) false conclusion that earthly measures of well-being are reflections of our heavenly virtues, so the poor must be faithless.

What's even worse, such a gospel can stifle our ability to hold a genuine faith. The promise of earthly rewards can encourage piety for all the wrong reasons. If faithfulness led to prosperity, then what's the reason to remain faithful? Well, obviously, in order to become prosperous. But that's not faith; that's a good business deal. Christ tells us again and again that his path is that of sacrifice, and whoever wishes to follow must take up his own cross. It takes real faith to labor on without the hope of immediate reward. It takes honest-to-god patience to maintain hope for the deferred gratification which is the Christian's reward.

Like the slave in Jesus' parable, we don't get to eat dinner right now. We've got to wait until the master is finished. None of us is so amazing at plowing the fields and tending the sheep of God's Kingdom that we get to knock off early, kick up our feet, and have a pint while we're still on the

clock. We've got to keep working; we've got to keep the faith and labor on, knowing that our reward at the end of the day is greater than any benefit we may experience in this life. That reward is the sweet sound of our Lord, who will meet us when the work is finally over, when finally the gentle shadows of death overtake us. Then dusk shall give way to daybreak, and our Savior will appear and utter those blessed words: "Servant, well done." Then will we realize that those words are the only reward we'll ever need or want.

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Amen.