

HANDS HELD OPEN

Pentecost 23, Year A: Judges 4:1-7; Matthew 25:14-30

I'm not clear on whether Paul Bosch said this or not. If he didn't, it's something he might have said in what he used to call in my seminary days "the teaching moment". The subject of the particular teaching moment I am remembering was the so-called *orans* position struck by presiding and assisting ministers when we lead prayer at corporate worship. (*Orans* is Latin for "praying" – and so, Paul was coaching us in the placement of our hands and arms when we pray.) Head held up, arms raised, elbows bent, hands held open: the *orans* position. According to Paul – and he did say this – the *orans* position is something we have inherited from our Hebrew ancestors: kneeling, with our hands held together, head bowed, and eyes closed is a much later posture for prayer which, he suggested, was borrowed from the battlefield – a captured soldier kneeling before the enemy and begging for mercy.

Now this is the part that I may have attributed to Paul: he can confirm it or deny it later. What I remember that he might have said is that our hands held open are placed as if to offer up our petitions; and that at the same time, we open our hands (and open ourselves) to receive the very blessings we ask for.

The *orans* position and its characteristic openness came to mind this week as I reflected on the prophetess Deborah, mentioned in our First Reading this morning, and the first two slaves in Jesus' parable of the talents, the two slaves who invested their master's money wisely, returning it to him with interest. All three characters model a kind of radical openness which, in light of the judgment of God, a theme present in both readings, defies logic. But, we learn in Jesus' parable, this radical openness, born of a living faith, is our call as the children of God. Especially when we do not anticipate it, especially when all the marks of our situation are negative and condemning, both readings counsel us to make the leap of faith that turns on the blessing, mercy, and grace of God. It is not a call to the magical thinking that too often excuses people and groups of people from responsible living – the kind of magical thinking that so many do around the present world environmental crisis, magical thinking that has humans continuing to pollute the earth, level rain forests, destroy the natural habitat of millions of living creatures and then expect that somehow Nature or Creation to bounce back and repair itself. No, the call in both our First Reading and Gospel this morning is a call to maturity and risk in how we live in relationship with God. It is a call to seek God on spec, so to speak; to become like the Prodigal Son and take that final trip home merely because, in spite of everything else we have become, and in spite of all our doubt, misgivings, and self-condemnation, we know that we are still family and God is still a good and loving parent. Today's readings are about discovering how to live as children of God in a world that proclaims the foolishness of life in the Spirit and affirms the wisdom of life in the flesh. Today's readings are about holding open our hands when every bone in our body and every thought in our head says, "Take cover!"

It was just last Sunday that we read of the new beginnings the people of Israel made at the end of Joshua's life. "We will worship only the God of the ancestors," they declared, "and forsake all other gods." It was a solemn covenant that promised to set the course for everything that was to come. At the opening of today's passage from Judges, we read "the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan...[who] oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years."

When I read passages like this with our confirmands, I encourage them to see these as stories of spiritual formation. The people of God are very much finding themselves in their many adventures in Hebrew scripture; they are discovering who God is and who they are as the children of God, and there is a lot of trial and error in the process. Whether or not things happened exactly as they are recorded is not as important as tracking their growing awareness of their identity as those through whom God could be made known in the world. And so, God is portrayed as both severe and gentle, according to their experience. And in these early years of their formation, they are acutely aware of God's judgment, and attribute everything bad that happens to them as punishment. A more mature faith relationship emerges over time as they become increasingly aware of the grace in their experience, and attribute such grace to God. The events of this morning's reading of a promised victory over their Canaanite oppressors is one such encounter. But this story of disobedience and repentance will be repeated over and over again throughout biblical history. And the value of these stories for readers is that our own life experience, our own seeking for truth, our own formation as the children of God is not that separate from the experience

of our ancestors. Although we may not attribute everything bad that happens to us to a punishing God, we are, nevertheless, aware of our *struggle* to live as the children of God, to be alive in the Spirit – especially in the context of the world I described a few minutes ago, the world in which God has been disposed of and the people of the First World, the G20, take centre stage, call the shots, and punish the miscreants. It is life in the flesh, developed to an extent never imagined by the apostle Paul who coined the phrase, “life in the flesh”.

What is fascinating is that in Jesus’ parable, the master who represents either God or Jesus in glory is as fully dimensioned as the God of the Hebrew scriptures. At the beginning of the parable, the master entrusts a huge amount of money to each of the slaves. The master’s actions suggest that there is a high degree of integrity in the master-slave relationship; and two of the three, it appears, respond in kind. When he returns the master commends the two as “good and trustworthy”.

But in the dialogue that occurs with the third slave, we learn that he knows the master as a harsh man who reaps where he did not sow, and gathers where he did not scatter seed.” And, it appears, it is this understanding of the master’s essential character that has immobilized him; that has led him to take the money and bury it.

Jesus shows no mercy for the third slave in his parable. In an action that is reminiscent of the wrath and judgment of God in the Hebrew Bible, the slave is cast out of the kingdom of God into the primordial darkness whose horrors are terrifying.

Now this is a story – a story about how to live as the children of God, and now specifically as the disciples of Jesus. We are the slaves of the story, and the “property” that has been entrusted to us is Jesus himself and the gospel. And Jesus, deeply aware of how human nature and sin can compromise goodness, does not want his disciples to miss the point. What they/what we have received in the gospel and in Christ Jesus himself is equal to the unimaginable treasure the slaves in the parable received. (One talent was equal to approximately 15 years’ wages. It was a huge amount of money the slaves were given.) The gospel, the treasure we have received from and through Jesus is just as precious, because it has the capacity to save us from ourselves and transform our world of suffering and death into a world of blessing and life, justice and equity, peace and promise. It is ours to invest, so to speak, in the world, in *our* world.

What is true is that our default setting as human beings is the posture of defeat – kneeling, with our hands held together, head bowed, and eyes closed. What Jesus calls us to is a mature and developed faith that would have us assess the integrity of our relationship as children of God and disciples of the Lord Jesus, and act on it; to stand before God and before the world with our head held up, our arms outstretched, and our hands held open, at one and the same time offering all that we have received, and, in that radical openness born of a living faith, discovering deep blessing.