

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Using Our Ingenuity for the Lord

Today's gospel reminds me of a story I read about an enterprising soldier. A young man joined the Israeli army and, after his training he was assigned to a tank division near the Israeli Syria border. He had only been there for one week when he went to his commanding officer and asked for a leave. The commanding officer started laughing and then said to him, "You want a leave? You just got here. OK, I'll give you a leave, but on one condition, you have to capture a Syrian tank." "No problem," said the young man. Later on that afternoon, a Syrian tank waiving a white flag pulled into the Israeli camp. The young Israeli soldier got out. The commanding soldier said, "The leave is yours. But how did you get this tank?" "Simple," said the soldier, "I drove to the DMZ in one of our tanks, and I saw a Syrian soldier in one of his tanks. I asked him if he wanted a weekend pass. He said, 'Sure,' so we switched tanks."

I believe the old comedian Danny Thomas told a story about two salesmen, Harry and Al. Harry saw Al walking down the street and said to him, "Al, I have a great deal for you. A real bargain! An elephant. A whole elephant. Yours for only \$5,000." Al said, "Are you crazy? What am I going to do with an elephant?" "Al," said Harry, "This is a magnificent beast. All grey. Complete with a working trunk." Then Al said, "But I have no place to keep an elephant. I live in a small three room apartment." "Al," said Harry, "Did I tell you about the tusks? Two five foot long tusks. This is a beautiful animal. They don't make them like this anymore." At this Al went wild and started screaming, "Look I live on the third floor, I couldn't feed the elephant. I don't even want an elephant." "You're a hard man, Al" says Harry, "OK, I'll throw in a second whole elephant for only a thousand bucks extra." And then Al said, "Harry, now you're talking."

It is amazing how astute we can be when making business deals. Whether it's buying a used car or selling a house, all of us learn how to get the most for our money. This is not something new. It's part of human nature to get the best deal possible. Jesus was aware of this. The parable he told about the steward who had to think quick to get himself out of a financial jam recognized human ingenuity.

The Lord's point is that we often demonstrate our intelligence, but we don't apply this intelligence to the one thing that really matter: our eternal salvation. Consider the number of times we've sat down and worked out how we can use our talents to be better Christians. Consider the number of times we've plotted out how we can foster the practice of our faith in our families. Consider the number of times we've thought out how we can put ourselves in situations which would avoid moral problems we've had in the past. If we were to add up the minutes spent a month doing this and compare them to the minutes a month spent working out our financial deals, would there be any comparison at all? "You cannot serve God and mammon," the reading concludes.

Basically, the Lord is telling us, "You have the intelligence, use it. Use it to fulfill

the mission you assumed when I called you to be my disciples. We must be as resourceful and dedicated in the ways of God as we are in the ways of commerce and politics. Jesus' parable challenges us to be as eager and ingenious for the sake of God's reign, to be as ready to use our time and money to accomplish great things for the Gospels as we are to secure our own happiness.

Some people, like those in the first reading from the prophet *Amos* have perfected how they can out-smart others. They cheat with their scales. They inflate money. That is not why God gave us intelligence. He gave us intelligence to make His presence real in the world.

At the end of the first reading the Lord says about the cheating merchants, "Never will I forget a thing they have done." This is bad news for them. There is good news, though, for all who fight the temptation of the world to use others for their own gain. There is good news for those who put Christ before immoral profit. If, as the reading from *Amos* says, God is aware of the bad things that men do, it follows that He is also aware of the good things that we do. God will never forget how you helped that young man or young woman learn how to be a better nurse, or office worker, or teacher or whatever, even though it was not your job to train him or her. God sees the times that you help others and protect them from those who would take advantage of their situation. He sees you when you convince that quite elderly neighbor that he or she doesn't need this or that gimmick some salesman is pressing them to get, like a new roof when their roof is fine, or a so-called investment that would just steal their money. God will never forget how you stepped aside from going out with your friends because your spouse is going through a tough spell and needs you to be around. God remembers every time you forced yourselves out of bed to take care of your children, even when it was just to convince them that there wasn't a monster in their room.

God sees, God knows, and God loves. He is the one who prompts us to act as Christians in the first place. We call this Grace.

Can we do it? Can we use our intelligence to withstand the pressures of the godless elements of our society and live as true Christians? Can we be God-fearing, God-respecting people? The Christian artist called Plumb sings, "I can't do this by myself." She is correct. We cannot be successful in life by ourselves. But we are not alone. God did not create us and then abandon us. Jesus did not just call us to follow Him and then leave us to our own devices. God gives us His Holy Spirit to empower us. He strengthens us with His Word and His very Body and Blood. He gives us the courage to stand up for the poor, the vulnerable, those about to be born, those being treated poorly by others.

The cleverness, skill and plain nerve that the manager used to save his skin, and that the soldier used to secure a weekend pass, and that Al used to get a good deal from Harry, we must use to make God's ways real in our world. Today we ask the Lord to help us to use our ingenuity to promote His Kingdom.