

Reflection on the Gospel-19th Sunday in Ordinary Time C
(Luke 12:32-48; shorter form 12:35-40)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The longer form of today's gospel brings together a number of loosely connected sayings of Jesus about trust and vigilance. Jesus addresses his disciples affectionately as a "little flock". He tells them that there is no need for fear. God, their "father", has delighted in giving them "the kin-dom" and they are to be generous in their turn. They are to sell their material possessions and give "alms" or, in a more accurate translation of the Greek original, they are to use their resources to engage in "works of mercy" (*eleēmosunē*). Their security resides in Jesus' assurance: "Where your treasure (or treasury) is, there your heart will be also." The parental and affectionate language of the opening verses is in sharp contrast with the violent imagery of the latter part of the gospel reading. Contrary to what some have argued in the past, the murderous slave master who cuts recalcitrant slaves into pieces can never be understood as a gospel image of God. In this problematic passage, the Lukan Jesus is engaging his hearers' experience of slavery in order to make a point about the need for attentiveness to the demands of the gospel. The vigilant slave is said to be "blessed" or "happy" or "privileged". From a contemporary perspective, it seems strange indeed to speak of a slave as fortunate. As the story unfolds, we realise that the slave enjoys a relative happiness in comparison with the fate of the other slaves.

The shorter form of the gospel in 12:35-40 presents a very strange teaching that would surely have been met with scepticism by its earliest hearers. The word picture that Luke paints is just not credible in a first century setting where slavery was taken for granted and where the respective roles of masters and slaves were characterised more by extreme violence than by mutuality of any sort. The disciples are told to be like slaves who keep vigil all night as they await the return of their master from a wedding banquet. Their function is to open the door when he knocks and, if they are awake enough to perform this function, there will be an extraordinary reversal of roles: the slaves will sit down at table while the master assumes the role of slave and serves their meal.

The disciples are being prepared for Jesus' announcement later in the narrative that he is among them as one who serves. They need to understand that something extraordinary is happening, even more extraordinary than the slave-master banquet scenario might suggest. God's way of being in the world is full of healing experiences and life-enhancing surprises. The final verses of the shorter reading shift to the image of the thief in the night. These verses are also about vigilance, being watchful and alert so as not to be taken by surprise in the final reckoning.