"You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much."

Mt 25:21

It seems fitting that the Gospel today – when we have an appeal on behalf of the Missionary Sisters of St Peter Claver – should be that of the Parable of the Talents which carries with it the promise of reward for those who use their God-given talents well, and punishment for those who waste their talents and fail to share with others the gifts that God has entrusted to them for the good of their neighbour.

The Missionary Sisters of St Peter Claver were founded by Blessed Mary Theresa Ledòchowska who, in 1885, had become a lady-in-waiting for the Grand Duchess Alice of Tuscany. It was whilst she was serving in that role, amidst all the glamour and splendour of court life, that she read a pamphlet about an anti-slavery campaign that was led by a Cardinal who called for the women of Europe to support his crusade against slavery. Listening, rapt, to the words of two women Franciscan missionaries as they described their experiences of working with the lepers in Madagascar, Blessed Mary Theresa's interest was sparked, and this interest was fanned into a flame as she knew, then, that she had to support the needs of the Church's missionary work in Africa and elsewhere.

Immediately, she decided to devote her life to supporting missionary work, and began a mission page in a Catholic periodical. These mission features, called *Echo From Africa*, were based on correspondence from African missionaries. The page of letters evolved into a monthly magazine, which made its debut in 1889, even though the nineteenth century was not really ready for a woman publisher.

Editing the magazine soon became a full-time job, and Emperor Franz Joseph personally released Mary Theresa from her court duties in 1891 so that she could devote all of her time and energy to the missions. Soon the work of promoting and supporting the needs of missionaries in Africa could no longer be considered one's woman effort. Mary Theresa, led by the Holy Spirit, enlisted 'auxiliary missionaries' and placed her work under the patronage of the Spanish Jesuit missionary, St. Peter Claver, whose life-long ministry work as a Jesuit had earned him the title of Apostle to the Slaves.

Very quickly, her little band of women grew, and in 1897 Mary Theresa and her first companions professed their final vows as Missionary Sisters of St. Peter Claver. For the next twenty-five years, the Foundress roamed Europe, enlisting people of all walks of life to help her congregation's support for evangelisation in Africa. Realizing that the missionaries were in urgent need of books in local languages, she expanded her work, producing everything from Bibles and hymn books to dictionaries in local languages. Pope St. Pius X gave his final approval to the constitutions in 1910, and the lady-in-waiting's dream blossomed into an international mission aid network. Her reward came when the recipients of her generous support offered gratitude for the assistance, calling Mary Theresa 'Mother of the Africans.' The gruelling schedule of appearances and editing took its toll on Mary Theresa, and she who had once enjoyed every material luxury and comfort was now living in very modest circumstances and suffering from tuberculosis. Despite her illness she worked to the very end, dying on 6th July 1922. The thousands of missionaries she had supported through prayers, encouragement, and material help felt as though they had lost a mother.

Blessed Mary Theresa did not, herself, become a missionary in the way that we normally think of missionaries. Her work was confined to Europe and to providing spiritual support through prayer and material support through the resources she published. Her mission was to teach others to support the missionary work of the Church and to show that we all

have a responsibility to be missionary in spirit, either by becoming missionaries ourselves or by supporting those who do.

Today, the Missionary Sisters of St Peter Claver are based in many different countries around the world but their chief work remains prayer and the active and material support of the Church's missionary endeavours, for example through their own publications. For Blessed Mary Theresa, there could be no greater work than supporting the spread of the Catholic Faith and the news of God's love, as auxiliary missionaries, as she herself said, 'I know of nothing more beautiful than to co-operate with God in the salvation of souls.'

As a lady-in-waiting at court, Mary Theresa had enjoyed every possible material comfort and convenience, mixing with the noblest members of society in a life of idleness and wealth. Yet as soon as she heard about the anti-slavery campaign, and about the work that the missionaries were doing amongst the lepers – society's poorest of the poor – she knew she had to use the gifts that God had given her to a better end. Her education and social connections allowed her to establish her network of support for those who were toiling in the mission fields, and in no time at all she had left court and taken her own vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as a religious sister and foundress of the Missionary Sisters of St Peter Claver. She gave up her life of luxury to serve the poorest members of society, and to raise the awareness of us all of the need to support the Church's fulfilment of Christ's instruction to go into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all the things that Christ had commanded (Mt 28:19).