Jesus surprises me in this morning’s gospel. He presents a parable in which a rich man, preparing for a long journey, distributes money to some servants: to one he gives 5 units; to another, 2 units; and to another, 1 unit. The monetary talent is a very large sum of money. The first two men doubled their amounts, and the master congratulates them as “good and faithful servants.” The last of the three recipients, knowing and fearing that the master was “a demanding person,” hid his talent in order not to lose it. The master, according to my favorite translation, declares, “You worthless, lazy lout.” He orders, “Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. To everyone who has more will be given, and he will grow rich. But from the one who has not, even the little he has will be taken from him.” The context of the story is that early church officials have received much responsibility, and if they do not respond appropriately, what responsibility they have, will be taken from them.

This parable surprises me. In so many gospel stories, we experience “good and gentle Jesus.” We read dozens of gospel stories relating Jesus’ mercy: the parables of the Prodigal Son, the woman caught in adultery, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in search of the one straying sheep. Pharisees repeatedly criticized Jesus for associating with tax collectors and prostitutes. Regarding Jesus’ generosity, we read in the parable of the workers in the vineyard about some men who arrived at the 11th hour, and who received the same pay as those who had labored since the first hour. In another story, Jesus seems to admire the cleverness of the wily manager who just after he was fired, reduced his clients’ IOUs so that he could get a job with them. In today’s gospel Jesus surprises me by condemning the non-productive servant, and even more so by giving what the poor man had lost to the rich men. What happened in today’s gospel? Was Jesus just having a bad day? Every once in a while, however, he throws us a curve ball. As the prophet Isaiah writes in the inspired word for God: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways.” (Is. 55.8)

What can help us to know better “God’s thoughts and God’s ways. ... in order that that we might better put on Jesus’ mind and heart?

May I suggest that we would use the method of the three legged stool of Revelation: namely, the Scriptures, Tradition, and the Magisterium. A stool needs three legs to stand firmly. So too to understand the will and ways of God, we need in combination the Scriptures, Tradition, and the Magisterium.

For example, some people claim “Scripture alone” is their guide. Martin Luther claimed that method because as a Scripture scholar, he believed that the Bible was so clear that no one could disagree with it or with his interpretation of it. Well, it took just two years for a long series of followers to start separating successively from him and one another. Sadly today, despite all the ecumenical advances of
the last half-century, we still have 44,000 Protestant denominations within the USA, all claiming to possess the truth. Over a hundred contradictions exist in the Bible regarding information and interpretation. You can Google “contradictions in the Bible,” and you will find them. “Scripture alone” doesn’t work in knowing the mind and heart of Jesus.

Tradition. The word “tradition” comes from the Latin verb, “trado, tradere,” which means “to hand down, to pass on.” Every family and society has its traditions. The Catholic Church has its traditions: our doctrinal teachings, moral teachings, liturgies and devotions. An example of doctrine is Mary was a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus. This teaching cannot be defended from the Scriptures alone. Traditionally, the Church has taught the doctrine of perpetual virginity since at least the fourth century. And the primary founders of Protestantism, namely, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Wesley, also believed and taught the doctrine of perpetual virginity: The Church has handed down this teaching even though it can’t be proven absolutely from the Scripture alone.

The Magisterium. The Latin root word of Magisterium is “magister,” which means “teacher.” The Church’s teaching office speaks on various doctrinal and moral topics. By way of practical example, Pope John Paul II and the Magisterium teach the following regarding capital punishment: “the state has the right to exact the death penalty.” And a few paragraphs later, the Catechism (2267) concludes, but “the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity "are very rare, if not practically non-existent." (EV 56) So, capital punishment is theoretically possible, just almost impossible to apply it morally. For personal reasons, I am not so opposed to capital punishment. But the Church is, therefore, I know there is something deficient in my thinking. If someone is wrong, either Jesus or his Church, or me; ... undoubtedly, it’s me!!!

If you ever find yourself surprised by how we Catholic Christians are invited to think and act, please remember the lesson of the three legged stool. The combination of Scriptures, Tradition, and the Magisterium, and none of them alone, reveals the truth for us. As Isaiah writes, “My thoughts are not your thoughts. Your ways are not my ways.” (Is. 55.8) The three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium, will best help us to put on the mind and heart of Jesus.