

## **Thirty Second Sunday of the Year November 12, 2017**

Wisdom 6:12-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Christian spirituality has always insisted on the need to live this life as a clear and certain preparation for the future eternal life. The mere desire of eternal life is not sufficient but the life a person lives must show in practical ways this preparedness and the worthiness for the Kingdom of Heaven. The message given to us today is one of watchfulness and to be ready to receive the Lord. As we approach the end of the Liturgical Year, the Church seems to place these very mysteries before us. We have to be alert to the signs God gives us in our lives. When troubles overtake us, we have to build our lives on the practice of faith, hope and love. We are called upon to keep the light burning in our lives. The Book of Wisdom affirms the immortality of the soul and promises the gift of the Divine personification of Wisdom to all who seek her. The stress is on the desire of those who want to live wisely; wisdom will be granted to those who search for God's meaning and purpose in life. St. Matthew's Gospel changes the emphasis on the theme of eternal life to stress the necessity of being awake and prepared for the Lord's coming and the definitive establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus tells of a division between those who prepare themselves for the patient wait for the proverbial spouse and those who do not. He speaks of a lost opportunity as those who should have been ready are shut out. Paul in the second reading reminds the Christians at Thessalonica of the true meaning of death for the Christian. The sleep of death is converted into a risen life and all Christians, both living and those who have already died, 'shall always be with the Lord'. It is this second coming that is to comfort and strengthen Christians here on earth.

The first reading of today taken from the Book of Wisdom written about hundred years before Christ speaks about what the title indicates. The word wisdom has several meanings. It means going beyond mere knowledge to the depth and breadth of the mind boggling issues of life. It means understanding and insight. It means the best way for one to relate to God and to other people. It means seeing every thought and word and deed in relation to the very purpose of life. Here wisdom presented is personified and presented as an alluring woman because of her divine origin, unfading, caring and waiting for the one who searches for her. It is in fact a literal personification of the attribute of God. The author says that the wisdom is easily recognized by those who love the truth and is easily

found by all who seek knowledge. The person who searches for true wisdom and really desires it will not have far to seek. The divine wisdom is never denied to all those who are worthy and are honest in their quest. Wisdom is ever present to the man who seriously thinks on life and its meaning and value. The Christian who shares his wisdom with the needy is the true Christian whose personal wisdom is ever radiant and unfading.

The Thessalonians were much preoccupied with the question of Christ's second coming as judge of the world. They even thought of escaping death by the early arrival of Christ in the Parusia. Some of the members of the community had died and they were worried about it. In today's Second Reading Paul tells the Thessalonians church what the Second Coming of Christ will be like. He tells them the Thessalonians converts must not grieve over the death of their relatives and friends unlike the pagans who had no hope in resurrection. Here Paul was addressing the issue of the resurrection of the physical bodies and the glorifying of all those who lived their faith in Christ until the end. He was telling those who were present that those who die first will not be glorified first. In fact, when the moment arrives, the physical bodies of the dead will rise from their graves to be lifted into the clouds alongside those who are presently living. The final judgment of all shall come at the same time, some going to the right and some to the left according to their rewards. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the proof and the guarantee of our own resurrection. Paul stressed to his brothers and sisters in Christ that he did not want them to be uninformed. Those who are alive today, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. As such, we should encourage one another with these words. He tells them that all the faithful will have eternal life with Christ when they complete their allotted time on earth.

In today's passage from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable, partially an allegory, based on Palestinian matrimonial customs, teaches us to be prepared at all times for the Lord's return. The narrative is something which would be very familiar to his Palestinian readers – a village marriage. Matthew gives the parable of ten virgins who were waiting eagerly for the coming of the bridegroom. Apparently ten girls would be asked to accompany the bride as she awaited the arrival of the bridegroom. The problem was that they had no idea when the bridegroom would turn up and, when it got dark, they would need to have lighted lamps. If the bride's companions were caught unawares, if they were not around when the bridegroom came, they could be locked out or left behind. The wedding among

the Jews at the time of Jesus was preceded by a week of feverish preparations on the part of the bride, assisted by her chosen attendants, unmarried maidens of her own age. The wedding celebration generally took place in the bridegroom's house. He accompanied by the friends of the bridegroom came to bride's house about sunset. Having received his bride from her parents and guardians, a procession was formed. With music and dance they went to the bridegroom's home for the wedding feast which would last whole night and sometimes a few days. There would be large number of invited guests, relatives and friends and all the neighbours and they would not exclude strangers if they dropped in. The guests who came for the wedding brought gifts and things necessary for the celebration. The rules of oriental hospitality were rigidly followed.

In this parable our Lord describes what will happen to the very special guests, the intimate friends of the bride who gladly accepted the invitation and went through a lot of trouble to prepare for the occasion and yet through carelessness was found unworthy to share in the festivities. The chosen bridesmaids had to carry lighted lamps in the bridal procession which always took place at night. All the ten came to the bride's place in good time dressed for the occasion and carrying their lamps with them. These lamps were generally small bronze or earthen vessels which held little oil enough for a few hours. Hence they normally carried small jars of oil to fill their lamps and to keep them burning continuously. Here Jesus points to the folly of the five young girls who took the lamp but forgot to take extra oil with them. The wise on the other hand remembered to take extra oil for they realized that their celebration would last through the night. As the bridegroom was delayed in coming they dozed off and fell asleep. There was the call at midnight to meet the bridegroom and the foolish ones recognized their mistake. They then unsuccessfully tried to borrow and finally had to go in search of the merchants for their purchase. Meantime the bridegroom arrived and the foolish ones lost their opportunity to join the festivities. They were indeed selected for the honour but now proved themselves unworthy of such invitation and privilege.

Jesus tells the story to impress his followers of the supreme need of vigilance and watchfulness. The parable shows that some of his followers, who have been chosen to play a special role in the nuptials of Christ with his Church, will forfeit their place at the eternal nuptials in heaven through their carelessness and not positive malice. The image Jesus gave of marriage regarding the kingdom of heaven was easily understood by his hearers. The reference here is primarily to

the second coming of Christ as he comes in glory to judge all mankind. On that day his kingdom will be completed and the eternal triumphal kingdom of heaven will begin. In this story Jesus illustrates what will happen on that day to some of those whom he had chosen and to whom he had given every facility to reach their one and only goal. In this parable, Matthew is telling the Christian community that the return of the Lord may be delayed beyond their expectation and that they should, therefore, prepare for the long wait by providing enough oil for their lamps. Many details of the parable make good sense when seen against the framework of this principal theme. The bridegroom is Christ and the bride is the church. The ten bridesmaids are the totality of the members of the church. The lamps, which all the bridesmaids had, could represent faith which all Christians have. The oil, which some of them had and others did not, would then represent good works. A lamp without oil is like faith without good works -- dead and useless. The message is still relevant to the Christians of our time. Their wisdom here consists in their taking prudent steps to do what they need to do in order to come face to face with their Lord.

The conclusion to be drawn from this story by the disciples is this: the time of the arrival of our Lord as judge of the universe, the day on which the eternal wedding feast of Christ with his elect will begin, is as uncertain as the arrival of the bridegroom. There is one sure way to be found ready on that all important moment is to be ever prepared and ready to meet the bridegroom. A follower of Christ cannot afford to be casual and unprepared for that moment. Like the foolish bridesmaids many will fail to make use of the means provided for the salvation and only realize their folly when it is too late. As we draw close to the end of the liturgical year, the church, through the gospel, invites us to contemplate the end – the end of our lives and the end of the world. The way to prepare for the end is not to live in fear and anxiety but with hope and expectation for the coming of the Lord. Jesus has told us that the Son of Man will come back on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. How and when that will be, we do not know for sure. But today's parable gives us the hope and tells us to prepare for the end by following the example of the wise virgins. The wise virgins took enough oil to keep their lamps burning. In the same way we should engage and persevere in good works to keep our faith alive. That is the best way to make ourselves ready and prepared for the Lord, no matter when the Lord chooses to come.

The Christian faith requires of us to listen to the invitation of faith and hope and recognize the path they show. For those who have squandered their personal gifts given by the Lord, this announcement will fill them with dread. We may feel that the wise virgins were rather selfish in refusing to share their oil with the foolish in such a critical situation. However, the parables of Jesus normally are making one point taken from some common experience of daily life. The focus is on that one important lesson to be taken note of. In the parable of the dishonest steward who falsified his entire employer's accounts Jesus does not condone his behavior but shows how he makes certain of his future. We can also say in the context of today's parable that the "oil" of loving service is not strictly speaking transferable to others. Our preparedness to meet the Lord is something that is ultimately only our responsibility. No one can say "Yes" to Christ on our behalf. Lord's response to those unprepared seems harsh, "I do not know you," as they were the ones unprepared to receive him. All are called for the wedding but only a few are among the chosen ones who take part in it. This is not due to any partiality on the bridegroom's part but because of the tardiness of those invited.

Today let us be thankful to God for His infinite love that controls our spiritual lives. We are thankful for the Body of Christ, the Church, where we can find spiritual support to persevere to the end in our spiritual journey as pilgrims. We are thankful for today's message that makes us aware of our human weaknesses and helps us to be spiritually mature call to become as shining lights in the world. The final advice of Jesus is very clear, to be prepared, to stay awake, because we do not know the day or the hour when we will be summoned to answer before the Lord God. As followers of Christ we live our lives spurred on by hope of the future. In a practical way we look for it in our business, at home, in Church projects, where we can reach out to others. As we contemplate on the word of God today we ask the grace that we may light the lamp of off our heart that we may be the shining light in the world. We ask the grace from the Lord that we may be always ready to accept him in our lives and be a shining example to all. The message for us today is that we may not be tentative in our response to the Lord but always be prepared to receive the Lord when he calls us.

When the great library of Alexandria burned, the story goes, one book was saved. But it was not a valuable book; and so a poor man, who could read a little, bought it for a few coppers. The book wasn't very interesting, but between its pages there was something very interesting indeed. It was a thin strip of vellum on

which was written the secret of the "Touchstone"! The touchstone was a small pebble that could turn any common metal into pure gold. The writing explained that it was lying among thousands and thousands of other pebbles that looked exactly like it. But the secret was this: The real stone would feel warm, while ordinary pebbles are cold. So the man sold his few belongings, bought some simple supplies, camped on the seashore, and began testing pebbles. He picked up ordinary pebbles and when he felt one that was cold, he threw it into the sea so as not to mix with others. He spent a whole day doing this but none of them was the touchstone. Yet he went on and on this way. He would pick up a pebble, find it cold, and throw it into the sea. He did this for weeks and months. One day, however, about mid-afternoon, he picked up a pebble and it was warm. He threw it into the sea before he realized what he had done out of sheer habit. Meantime he realized that the metal piece attached to his waste belt was heavy and shining. It had in fact turned into gold. He had the stone in hand and he had lost it forever. So it is with opportunity. Unless we are vigilant, it's easy to fail to recognize an opportunity when it is in hand and it's just as easy to throw it away.

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