

32nd Sunday of the Year, Cycle A

November 6, 2011

Wisdom 6:12-16

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-11

When we're confronted with a story such as today's gospel parable, it is important to ask the right kind of questions--not the wrong kind. For example: back in novitiate days Fr. Andrew told of a Sister, who, in order to give a lesson on traffic safety to her class, told her pupils a fictitious story of a child who had received a little red sled for Christmas. The child immediately went sliding down a hill and across a street, without looking right or left, and was hit by a truck. "The moral, said Sister, is always be careful when crossing the street; always look both ways. Any questions?" One pupil raised her hand: "Sister, what happened to the little red sled?" If our response to today's parable of the wise and foolish virgins is to ask, "How could anyone expect to go out and buy oil at midnight?" or "Wasn't the bridegroom kind of mean to lock them out just because they were late?"--those are "little red sled" questions. The treatment of the foolish virgins is explicable only if we delve into the real meaning of the parable--the religious truth intended--rather than at the level of story. The real point is that we must always be prepared for the Lord's return, "for you know not the day or the hour."

The parable gives a practical admonition about our conduct: our goal must be to be among the wise, i.e., those prepared for the Lord's coming; this is wisdom. To be lulled into a false sense of security, to lose the sense of urgency, because of the Lord's delay, is the opposite, i.e., foolishness. Today's first reading, from the Book of Wisdom, urges us to seek wisdom: "Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom, and she is . . . found by those who seek her." At the same time, the reading indicates that the initiative often comes from the other direction: "She (Wisdom) hastens . . . in anticipation of [our] desires" and "he shall find her sitting by his gate." So often when we fall into sin or spiritual sloth, it is not our own fervent prayer that begins to turn the tide, but God's own initiative in seeking us out.

The second reading also speaks of the joyous lot of those who are wise. It does not use

that terminology, but those who go forth to meet Christ can be only the faithful (that is, the "wise virgins" of the parable): "Then we the living, the survivors, will be caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air." This is not to be understood in terms of any "rapture," such as that idea so dear to fundamentalistic hearts. Jerry Falwell, Hal Lindsey, et al. expect the end of the world to be preceded by a terrible cataclysm wrought by human agency, which they sometimes equate with WW III. They, Lindsey and co, as "real Christians," will be raptured out before these terrible things take place; instead they will meet Christ in the air and be taken by Him to heaven. All the rest of humankind (including all those they judge to be "nominal Christians") will suffer every imaginable distress on earth--all this before the Lord's return and final judgment.

And we can't forget that, within this past year, Harold Camping deceived thousands with the promise that the rapture would take place May 21st. Later he apologized for his faulty prediction, which was in fact his third faulty prediction. I don't know whether Hal Lindsey ever apologized, though he was equally misleading, specifying the year, but without mentioning a specific calendar date. We can be sure, however, that in spite of all these failed predictions, such people will continue to hold to their scenario. The problem is, of course, not the failure to get the date right, but that the whole idea is wrong-headed. What St. Paul is really saying is that we will meet Christ in the air as a welcoming committee to escort Him in triumph to earth. It is exactly the same conception (and same Greek word--apantesis) as we have in the gospel in the expression "Come out and meet [not "greet"] [the bridegroom]"; we see the same thing (and again the same Greek word) in Acts of the Apostles, where Paul, on his way to Rome, is met by Christians coming out to Three Taverns to escort him to Rome (Acts 28:15).

Two weeks from today is the end of this liturgical year and after that we confidently, automatically, expect the beginning of the new Advent cycle--but who knows? "Be watchful, for you know not the day or the hour." What does it mean to be watchful? What, concretely, are we to do? As we approach the end of the liturgical year, this message of wakefulness remains the dominant theme until its climax in the last Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King. The wakefulness should have a three-fold thrust. First, mindful of those wonderful scenes from the Book of Revelation of the heavenly liturgy, we should strive to come with ever greater fervor to the worship of God. Second (from next Sunday's gospel, with the parable of the talents), use the talents God has given us to advance the work of the Kingdom. Third, instructed by the gospel of Christ the King, the separation of the sheep and the goats, we must remember that whatever we do to the least of His little ones, we do to Him.

One problem for many of us is that there is little occasion to perform the kind of ministries referred to in this gospel. Our kitchen master feeds the hungry (hungry monks, at least); the Guestmaster welcomes strangers; Bro. Dunstan, as Infirmarian, cares for the sick. But, for the most part, those are not the kind of things most of us spend our time doing. Our Lord deliberately gave very concrete examples, which therefore may or may not be relevant in every life every day. Hopefully the attempt to advance the work of the Kingdom by teaching and in other ways will be accepted. But none of the works we perform avail for anything except for the love with which they are done. So it all comes back to all we do for others being done for Christ. And of course that cuts both ways: if neglecting to do good to others is to neglect Christ, how much more harming others--e.g., slighting them, harming them through slander or detraction, treating them unkindly--is harming Christ. The hungry, the naked, the imprisoned are usually those at some distance from our daily lives; the ones we need especially to exercise care toward are those close to us, those we deal with daily. The call to watchfulness, then, is a call to look after each other: to look out for each other is to look out for Christ.

Fr. Joseph Jensen