

Homily Notes for Sunday, November 12, 2017, 32nd in Ordinary Time

Wis 6:12-16; I Thes 4:13-18; Mt 25:1-13

1. Summary: Wisdom and Prudence are necessary for being disciples. How can we know that something is wise and prudent?

2. Scripture lessons:

3. The first reading: Jesus' parable in today's Gospel shows us five well-prepared, wise women, and the first reading chosen for today offers us Wisdom, personified as a woman. Writing in Greek to the dispersed Jews living in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, in Egypt, around 100 BC, the author wants his fellow Jews to seek wisdom and learn from it. Wisdom is a Divine gift – but a gift that will not elude the one who seeks it sincerely. What the author suggests is that the faithful adherence of the Alexandrian Jews to their ancestral religion in their somewhat hostile environment is seeking after Divine wisdom. The Jews need not envy the wisdom of the pagan philosophers, because they themselves have true wisdom in their Sacred Scripture, a wisdom which regulates not only this life but the next also. They must live their lives in strict conformity with the Divine wisdom given them so generously by God. Those who are watchful enough to find and welcome wisdom will also find that they will be prepared for the rest of the journey – from this life to the next.

The message given by the first reading is clear. It is guiding faithful Jews who were living in the midst of a corrupt Greek culture to follow closely all the spiritual and moral teachings of their God. Their situation was very similar to ours today where we live in a culture increasingly corrupt and hostile to God and his values.

4. The second reading: First Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters. When he wrote it, contemporary Christians, including Paul himself, expected Jesus to come very soon --within their lifetime -- to rebuild the Kingdom and to establish his glorious reign. So they needed to be vigilant in order not to miss his return. Some quit their jobs in the belief that the Kingdom was at hand. But then the years passed and there seemed to be no signs of the Second Coming. Paul writes this earliest Christian letter to respond to the community's fears and questions about those who die before the Parousia: will the few Christians who die in this short period somehow miss out on the benefits of Jesus' return? Paul says they will not, because what God has wrought in the death and Resurrection of Jesus is powerful enough to save even those who have already "fallen asleep." Paul helps them to realize that what they need to do is believe in what the Lord has done for us. He doesn't want them to worry about those who have already died. He explains, "*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope*" (1 Thes, 4:13). Instead, the Thessalonians should prepare themselves for the Kingdom. The central idea is clear: only the alert and the vigilant can experience God coming in their lives. Those who are asleep to the present will never be ready when God calls them to himself.

5. Today's Gospel passage is situated in the context of Matthew's discourse in chapters 25 and 26 on the end times and the second coming of Christ. After speaking of the destruction of the temple (Mt 24:1-3) and the end of the age (Mt 24:4-51), the Evangelist takes up the parable of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids, which Jesus used to illustrate teachings about the coming of the Kingdom. Here Jesus warns the faithful to be ready.

6. The parable tells a story which could have happened at any time in a Palestinian village and which could still happen today. Since a wedding was a great occasion, the whole village lined up at the sides of the road to wish God's blessings on the bride being taken in procession by her groom to her new home. The invited ones would join the procession, which started from the bride's house and moved to the groom's house, to take part in the week-long celebration of the marriage. Since the bridegroom might come to the bride's house unexpectedly, the bridal party had to be ready at any time, with accompanying virgins (bridesmaids in our day), carrying lighted torches and reserve oil in jars. Five of these virgins, who, having forgotten to bring an extra jar of oil had to run to the dealers to buy some, and so missed the arrival of the groom's party, lost their chance to take part in the celebration. They lost not only the opportunity of witnessing the marriage ceremony, but also of participating in the week-long celebration that followed.

7. The meaning of the parable: This parable has both a local and a universal meaning.

The local meaning is that the foolish virgins represent the "Chosen People of God" who were waiting for the Messiah, but were shut out from the messianic banquet because they were unprepared. "The division between

the wise and the foolish virgins becomes the division between those in Matthew's church who keep the commandments of Christ, the new lawgiver of the church, and those who hear his words but fail to do what he commands."

The universal meaning is that the five foolish virgins represent those of us who fail to prepare for the end of our lives. What matters is not the occasional or the last-minute burst of spiritual fervor but habitual attention to responsibilities before God. At the final judgment, there will be no depending upon the resources of others, no begging or borrowing of grace. The parable guides us to be prudent, having our lives always in order rather than waiting until it is too late.

8. What is Wisdom and what is Prudence? "For taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence."

9. Wisdom is a spiritual gift (Isa 11:2) that enables one to know the purpose and plan of God. It is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is much more than lots of information or data. Wisdom implies superior judgment and understanding based on broad knowledge (CCC 1831).

10. Prudence is the virtue which disposes a person to discern the good and choose the correct means to accomplish it. It is one of the cardinal moral virtues and provides the proximate guidance for the judgment of the conscience (CCC 1806). Prudent suggests the wisdom of one who is able to discern the most suitable course of action in practical matters.

11. A modern example of wisdom and prudence (or foolish error). Texting while driving. A relative of mine was driving behind her husband in her car going home when he suddenly saw in his rear-view mirror her drive off the road and roll the car. She was almost killed. What happened? She was texting and lost control of the car.

12. How can we know that some action or some knowledge is wise and prudent? Could it be when we feel "good" and "at peace" about it? Not at all. Let us be careful about "feelings." The Catechism refers to "emotions" under the title of "the Passions" (See CCC 1763).

"The term 'passions' refers to emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good or evil." "In themselves passions are neither good nor evil... Strong feelings are not decisive for the morality or holiness of persons; they are simply the inexhaustible reservoir of images and affections in which the moral life is expressed" (CCC 1768).

We are more surely guided by St Paul in Romans: 12:2:

"Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

13. Correct formation of conscience. We should be directed by a correctly formed conscience rather than our feelings. Hence, we must know rationally what is good and bad, right and wrong from the point of view of God in order to have wisdom. Feelings can confirm or mislead. Our conscience needs to be formed and guided by the truths of Sacred Scripture and Tradition as interpreted by the Church.

14. Our readings on this 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time are preparing us for the end of our lives, that we might be ready, like the five wise virgins, having our lives (lamps) ready for the coming of the bridegroom and our personal salvation. There will be not time to get ready when he comes.

Problem: Elena has contracted marriage with a very wealthy non-Catholic and has two children. Before her marriage she was a devout Catholic but now she has given up many of her previous religious practices, though she still claims to be a good Catholic. She will not have a crucifix on the wall of any of the rooms in her house, because she asserts that the representation of the cruel sufferings inflicted on Our Lord will have a terrifying and depressing effect on the minds of her children. What do you think of her argument against the presence of a crucifix in her home?