

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Wisdom 6:12-16

This book, which the Vulgate calls “Wisdom” and the Septuagint calls “The Wisdom of Solomon,” is one of the most typical books of Wisdom literature.

Although the book itself claims that it was written by Solomon, it is a case of pseudonymity: a device often used in the ancient world to highlight the importance of a literary work. Here the author has used the prestige of Solomon, the greatest of the wise men of Israel. The inspired writer wrote the entire book in Greek and is thought to have been a Hellenized Jew, thoroughly familiar with Greek culture, writing probably at Alexandria (Egypt).

Against the background of Egyptian worship of animals and mockery of Jewish trust in God, the author devotes much of the first part of his book to the ineffectiveness of such mockery when God has promised immortality to those who remain faithful. Using Greek modes of thought, he is the first to express the hope of afterlife in terms of immortality of the individual soul.

In the second section of his book, from which our reading for today comes, the inspired author speaks in praise of wisdom.

To the Jew, wisdom is the knowledge of how to conduct oneself in speech and conduct in such a way as to dispose others favorably, to foster one’s own success and advancement, and to live free of the anxiety which arises from hostility, opposition, and failure. Young men were trained in the manners of a good scribe when they learned their letters. Israelite wisdom differed from the wisdom of other cultures in that it was modified by its relation of faith in Yahweh. Other cultures, such as the Egyptians, had gods who were venerated for their wisdom. These gods were consulted like specialists: one for love, another for the sea, another in matters of war, yet another for something else. Only Yahweh is truly wise – his wisdom is exhibited in creation. In the Old Testament wisdom appears as a personified accompaniment of Yahweh in His creation – as a heavenly being which reflects the majesty and attributes of divinity – a personification of Yahweh’s functions.

¹² Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom,

Proverbs 3:15 says wisdom “is more precious than corals, and none of your choice possessions can compare with her.”

and she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her.

In Proverbs 8:17 wisdom says “Those who love me I also love, and those who seek me find me.”

¹³ She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of men's desire; ¹⁴ he who watches for

her at dawn shall not be disappointed, for he shall find her sitting by his gate. ¹⁵ For taking thought of her is the perfection of prudence, and he who for her sake keeps vigil shall quickly be free from care;

Like wisdom herself. Wisdom 7:23 says she is “kindly, firm, secure, tranquil, all-powerful, all-seeing.”

¹⁶ Because she makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her, and graciously appears to them in the ways, and meets them with all solicitude.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Christian teaching on the end of the world and the last things is the subject which receives the most attention in both 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. The matter is dealt with on two levels: what happens to a person when he or she dies (individual eschatology); and what happens at the end of time, when the ultimate victory of the Church will be revealed, the good will go to heaven and the reprobate will be condemned (general eschatology).

Man’s life does not end with death, because his soul is immortal and lives forever. Unlike those who have no hope, believers should not be saddened by the prospect of death (the opening verse of today’s reading). The moment the soul is separated from the body, it enjoys the vision of God (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8), but the body must await the day of resurrection – Christ has risen and we too will rise and join Him (the second verse of today’s reading).

Therefore, we hope in the resurrection of our bodies at the end of time, when our Lord comes again in glory. Saint Paul describes this second coming as an event of great solemnity in our reading today, an event accompanied by an angel’s call and the sound of a trumpet. The language Saint Paul uses to describe this event (called apocalyptic language) highlights the mystery and power of God. After the parousia (Greek for “appearance” or “showing”) will come the resurrection of the dead. Each body will be brought back to life by its own soul, and those who are still alive on that day will, together with their brethren who are dead and have risen, go to meet the Lord (what the Fundamentalists call the “rapture”). However, the bodies of both will be glorified and therefore those who died before the parousia will have no advantage or disadvantage compared to those who are still living at this point.

¹³ We do not want you to be unaware,

This is a favorite phrase of Paul’s when he is drawing attention to an important point.

brothers [and sisters], about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.

Not with a natural sorrow at the loss of a loved one, but with a pagan sorrow that is without Christian hope.

¹⁴ For if we believe

The certitude of faith is in the resurrection and a life of glory with Christ.

that Jesus died and rose,

An early creedal formula.

so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

The resurrection of Christians is attributed to God. Jesus is not the cause of death, but a bond persists between the Christian and Christ in death just as it did in life. The goal of God's activity in the resurrection is to effect the reunion of the believer with the Risen Christ.

¹⁵ **Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord,**

This phrase has aroused speculation as to whether this is an otherwise un-chronicled saying of Jesus or a private revelation. In any case, it is clear that he is speaking with the authority of Christ.

that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord,

This phrase caused some confusion, even among the Thessalonians who took it to mean that the parousia would occur very soon.

will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep.

No precedence or favor will be shown for the living – or the dead – both will have died in Christ.

“We think that those who have been perfected and who no longer commit sin are alive in Christ. The dead in Christ are those who are favorably disposed to the Christian faith and who prefer to live a good life but who have not, in fact, actually succeeded, but still sin, either in ignorance of the accurate true word of justice or in weakness, because their decisions are overcome by the flesh, which lusts against the spirit (Galatians 5:17). And it is conformity with these matters that Paul, conscious of himself, says, because he has already succeeded, ‘We who are alive.’ But those whom we spoke of as dead have special need of the resurrection, since not even those who are alive can be taken up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air before the dead in Christ first rise. This is why it has been written, ‘The dead in Christ shall rise first, then those who are alive,’ etc.” [Origen (A.D. 226), *Commentaries on John* 20,232-233]

¹⁶ **For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God,**

This phrase could very well be referring to the same thing; the voice may sound like a trumpet. In Old Testament theophanies the trumpet (horn/shofar) plays a role. The horn is used to assemble God's people at Sinai (Exodus 19:13, 16, 19).

will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Their soul will reenter their now glorified body.

¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them

Those who lived until this event will also have a glorified body.

in the clouds

Clouds are the traditional veil and accompaniment of God and of the Risen Christ.

to meet the Lord in the air.

Since the body is glorified and the Lord has “come down” the reunion of the Christian with his Lord takes place in the heavenly realm – not on earth.

Thus we shall always be with the Lord.

This is the climax of Saint Paul’s teaching – at the parousia time ends and eternity starts.

¹⁸ Therefore, console one another with these words.

Next week we will hear about the timing of the parousia.

Gospel - Matthew 25:1-13

Last week we heard Jesus take the scribes and Pharisees to task for not “fathering” the people; for not setting the proper example and treating them fairly. We now skip over chapter 24 (this chapter is read in the 1st Sunday of Advent, Cycle A and on June 30th, the Feast of the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome), and move to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins; a parable peculiar to Matthew. There is little detailed information about wedding practices at the time of Christ, but there was a solemn procession from the home of the bride to the home of the bridegroom: the taking of the bride from her father’s house to his own by the bridegroom was the symbolic act of marriage. Since the bridesmaids went to welcome the groom, this indicates that they went to accompany him and his party to the house of the bride and from there, presumably to the house of the groom. It is from the wedding feast that the foolish virgins are excluded – and since it is the bridegroom who denies them, the feast must be at his house.

^{25:1} "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Expectant disciples (believers). In Hebrew numerology ten represents responsibility and law.

² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps.

Since it is not known when the parousia will happen, one must always be ready to go and meet the Lord. Five in Hebrew numerology represents grace, God’s goodness.

⁵ Since the bridegroom was long delayed,

The delay of the parousia sets up the problem being addressed here – the danger of love growing cold.

they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

Absolute vigilance is not so much the point as readiness.

⁶ At midnight,

The Son of Man is the Lord of surprises – He comes when you least expect it.

there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

This expresses the longing of the early Church for the consummation of the kingdom.

⁷ Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

The oil represents the good works of living out the gospel; the foolish virgins have just been coasting along.

⁹ But the wise ones replied, 'No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.'

Refusal by the wise doesn't constitute a lack of charity or helpfulness – good works are not completely transferrable. Others can help, but readiness to accept salvation is, ultimately, a matter of personal responsibility.

¹⁰ While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him.

Those who are prepared to accept salvation are admitted to the wedding feast of the Lamb – the heavenly banquet.

Then the door was locked. ¹¹ Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!'

Those who are not prepared can not expect to be admitted.

¹² But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.'

See Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46.

¹³ Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.