

**Homily for November 7, 1999
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A**

By Father Charles Bowes

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

We live in hope, not fear.

As the world approaches January 1st, 2000, there are groups who believe that something sensational will take place as the new century begins. There are Christian groups who focus entirely on the “last things.” They speak of the “eminent return of Christ” with pictures of the Lord soaring in the clouds above us.

Our second reading today, 1 Thessalonians 4, reflects the first-century picture of the flat world, with heaven somewhere high up in the sky. First-century Christians were convinced that the Second Coming of Christ would take place during their lifetime. They pictured the Lord returning in the sky, using imagery which they understood but which makes no sense to us today. For many of these people, the word “millennium” refers to the belief that Christ will reign on Earth for a thousand years before the end of the age when the Lord will take his saints into heaven. While these ideas were found in the early Church, they keep cropping up. There was a fascination with setting dates and timetables. All sorts of clues are found, often by finding special meaning in numbers. Most of these come from very literal interpretations of the last book of the Bible,

the book of Revelation. Through the centuries these people have found Napoleon and Hitler and Stalin and many other world leaders among these apocalyptic clues. Dates have been set for Christ’s return and then re-interpreted as the time has come and gone.

In July of this year, the New York Times reported that one in ten Americans thinks that the “world as we know it” will end on January 1st, 2000, and that seven in ten Christians believe that Jesus will return for the last judgement within the next century. People living in London, England have been getting printed material delivered to their homes that claims that Christ has returned to the Earth and is hiding somewhere in London. Soon the Lord, called Maitreya, will come out of hiding and will reveal himself to all people. The Philadelphia-based Millennium Watch Institute has more than twelve hundred self-styled prophets in its database. Some of them lead doomsday cults which need to be watched carefully as they could be dangerous to society. Talk shows chatter about the “rapture.” This stuff is drivel – there’s no wisdom to it.

We Christians believe that God stands at the end of it all and that Christ will reign in glory. And through Christ, we believe that we too shall live eternally with him. This is our firm hope. But we are not in the business of setting dates. In fact God’s word says that we don’t know when the Lord will return.

Our job is to be prepared, like those five wise maidens in Jesus' story of Matthew 25. There's the wisdom. We never know the hour or the day. All ten bridesmaids, recall, were asleep. The difference was that five of them were prepared. The point is not that we should calculate when destiny might arrive. It is that we should be ready for it every moment of our lives.

Our scripture readings this week and in the next two weeks deal with the "end times" and are not prognostications of the future, even though they remind us of the "four last things" – death, judgement, heaven and hell. That can be instructive, yes; but instead of the four last things, it is far wiser to think of the things that last. It is a mistake to take such passages as occult predictions concerning the end of the world. It is far wiser to see them as a way to wisdom at the start of each day. Each day may be our last. The farewell we give might never be given again. We may not see another day. To be wise, then, is not to calculate the time of departure. It is to spend the present moment – the waiting – well.

We rush through time to get things done. When we are not getting things done, we think we are wasting time. But the real waste of time is the way we rush through it. We may think we are active, but we are really inattentive. In hurrying to prepare ourselves for things not yet upon us, we are unprepared for what is here. And sooner or later, our gas runs out.

Recently I noticed I was becoming increasingly distracted in prayer – my mind running in a thousand different directions. When faced with that, I use a simple technique: I pray the Lord's prayer, slowly and thoughtfully – I simplify and slow down. Freed, for a

moment, from my cares, I feel the end times. One can almost touch eternity; sense a connectedness with all that is.

It is all opportunity – this life. It is all now. The last things are the lasting things: this moment of gratitude, this one gift of another breath, this particular person before me, this chance to hope, this hour to believe. It is all now. Eternity is now. And God is with us now. All that we need do is be alert. At life's end, no matter what the hour or day, we will only welcome the presence to whom, in our rare wise times, we have learned to be attentive.

Journeying to this table and to this gathering awakens us to see and to savor the eternity in the present moment.

When St. Ignatius Loyola was a student, it is said that he had been playing a game with friends when one asked, "What would you do if you knew that the world end in two hours?" One student replied, "I would go to the chapel to pray." Another said, "I would go to my brother and be reconciled to him." Finally they asked Ignatius and he replied gently, "I would finish the game."

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