

**Homily for November 6, 2005
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**

By Father Charles Bowes

Wisdom 2:12-16

Psalm 163:2-8

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

We invite God to make us ready to see God whenever and wherever.

Quite likely, most of us have seen the worn cartoon of the beatnik wearing or carrying a sign reading: “The end is near.” More often than not, we can see in the cartoon that the end is near for the one carrying the sign: Something is about to fall, a car is coming around the corner, or whatever. We get a chuckle, think of how foolish the sign-bearer is, and go about our way.

Some missionaries in Appalachia tell the story of the hairpin turns on the edge of a mountain. At one particularly dangerous curve, with no guard rail and a long drop awaiting the stray car, a well-read sign was planted with those same words: “The end is near.” What a different feeling than reading cartoons to read those words as you drive by a deadly precipice!

Today we hear a famous parable of Jesus, the parable of the 10 virgins, as given in Matthew chapter 25. We hear a good story, we sympathize with one group of the women or the other for various reasons, we wonder why the groom was so harsh, and we probably walk away a bit puzzled. That’s the way parables are: They catch us a bit off-guard; they leave

us thinking. What is this story about?

Well, I’m going to say first what the parable is not about and then, secondly, I’ll describe how the Catholic Church reads and uses the parable.

First, this parable is not about the rapture. Many of our fundamentalist Christian brothers and sisters have come to see this story as one about the rapture. Yet the whole idea of the rapture is a fairly recent concoction.

If you haven’t heard, the rapture is talked about as a fiery end of the world, where the righteous will be taken up on clouds while the rest of humanity will be left on earth to endure the last events (which will not be pretty). At the end of this 1,000 years, Jesus will come and initiate a new heaven and a new earth.

Pieces of this scenario may sound familiar. And indeed, there are biblical passages that talk about Jesus’ second coming. But the whole “Left Behind” type scenario was a creation of the 1800s. Catholics believe in the second coming of Jesus, but we don’t accept the mean-spiritedness of the fundamentalist rapture. And that’s not what this parable of the 10 virgins is about.

And that brings me to my second point: what the parable is about. It’s about being prepared – prepared to meet God certainly at death, whenever that is – but prepared also to meet God always and everywhere. The last three Sundays of this liturgical year focus on the

inevitability of death and the return of the Lord at the end of human history. The parable of the bridesmaids is taken from Jesus' fifth and final discourse in Matthew's Gospel - the great eschatological discourse.

According to the custom in Gospel times, the groom would go to the bride's house on the day of the wedding to finalize the marriage contract with his father-in-law. Then, the bridegroom would return to his own home with his bride. As the couple approached the house, bridesmaids would meet them - signaling the beginning of the wedding feast. Jesus uses the image of the wedding feast several times in the Gospel to symbolize God's invitation to His dwelling place - the world to come.

The main point of the parable is not about "watching," because both the wise and the foolish virgins fell asleep. What divided the two groups was not that one group watched and the other didn't, but that one group was prepared and ready. The story's focus is on the five virgins who were poorly prepared.

Rather than terrify or intimidate us or drive us to despair, the inevitable arrival of the bridegroom is to make us appreciate the preciousness of the time we have been given by God in this life and inspire us to make the most of this time...filling our lamps with the oil of compassion, reconciliation and justice as we await Christ's coming. Believing is only half of it. We are invited to be aware, hungry and thirsty for God - ready to meet God wherever and whenever God comes - just as our fasting for an hour before Holy Communion makes us hungry for the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation.

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see God whenever and wherever.**