

HOMILY SUNDAY 32-A (Homily 02)

“Be Ready – Live in the Kingdom”

(Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 63; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13)

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A priest was about to preside at the funeral of a notorious mafia criminal. His brother, a mafia boss, demanded the priest say only positive things about the dead man or their contribution to the church would be much smaller. So the priest began his sermon by saying that the deceased man, compared to his brother, was a saint.

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the readings today remind us to be wise – to be ready for death, or the end of time, by living in the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospel, Jesus is addressing his disciples, so these readings are really meant for us to hear, as we profess to be disciples of Jesus. What Jesus is speaking about is his favourite topic, the Kingdom of God. So the focus of the parable Jesus recounts is on the Kingdom of God.

In this parable, the lamps can be seen as symbolic of formal, institutional religion. The Jews of Jesus’ day were steeped in this kind of religion, a religion based on keeping the Law and the performance of sacrifices in the Temple. While certainly good in itself, this formal religion was rife with formalism, rituals performed without personal investment or commitment to the deeper values of love, compassion, understanding and forgiveness.

Those values are represented by the oil in the parable. Given the nature of Jesus’ preaching, that oil also represents belief in him as the Messiah, the Lord, the one sent by God to reveal to us the inner nature of God’s heart. That oil thus represents a personal, intimate, loving relationship with Jesus that would give life and fullness to the religious institutions of the Jews.

To live in the reign of God, therefore, is to believe in Jesus, to have a personal relationship with Jesus, and to live his teachings. Those who do so, symbolized by the bridesmaids with oil in their lamps, are already living in the kingdom of God and will not be judged.

The parable underlines the importance of this readiness. The key is to live in the kingdom and be ready, as the virtuous are not judged. This is clearly stated in John 5:24 where Jesus proclaims, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life, and does not come under judgment,

but has passed from death to life.”

That is the deeper meaning of this parable. The bridesmaids who did not have any oil in their lamps, symbolized the Jewish religious leaders who refused to believe in Jesus, whose only relationship with him was to constantly oppose him, test him and in the end, reject and crucify him. They are the ones who were choosing to live outside the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate, and of course would find themselves locked out at the end of time.

The first reading from the Book of Wisdom casts this choice to live in the kingdom as the virtue of Wisdom. To be able to profess such faith in Jesus, and to live in a close loving relationship with him, is something that all should seek, should desire, should love and focus on. This stance is radiant, eternal, and understanding of the meaning of life.

For St. Paul, in the second reading, that choice was urgent, because he was convinced that Jesus was coming soon, and that he and those he was addressing would still be alive when Jesus came. By that time, however, some of the disciples had died, and Paul was forced to address the question that arose naturally – what about them, their relatives and friends who had died – what would happen to them? Paul, of course, assures his flock that those disciples who had died would be included in the resurrection of the dead, and all who believe, who were living in the reign of Jesus, would be united with him for all eternity.

The key ingredients in these readings today, then, are to believe in Jesus and to live as he would have us live, in the reign of God, so that we will be ready to face death whenever it might come to us. We are ready because we are already living in the kingdom. That is the meaning of his closing words in today’s gospel: “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

That need to be ready is underscored by the recent death of an Oblate priest, Fr. Alex Carriere, pastor of Enoch First Nations community and the parish of Lac. St. Anne in Alberta. People noted at a wake the previous evening that his words were a little bit confused, which was uncharacteristic of him. When he did not show up on time for the funeral he was to perform the next day, his brother Oblates went to check up on him at his residence. They found him lying dead face, down on the floor. The police were called of course. One of them happened to check his computer and found that he had been googling “Heart Attack Symptoms” when he obviously had a heart attack, fell off his chair, and died.

What is comforting is that Fr. Alex, a very loving, conscientious and talented priest, a humble servant of God, was ready for his unexpected death. He was living in the reign of God, his lamp filled with the oil of a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus and a life full of loving service for all people. He stands as a model for all of us as someone who was like the bridesmaids in the gospel whose lamps were trimmed and full of oil.

As Krystyna Higgins put it in her reflection on this Sunday's readings in *Living With Christ*, "The God of surprises often beckons to us in unexpected circumstances. Let us pray that we may always keep the lamp of our heart lit so as to recognize and welcome the divine presence wherever it may be found."

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is biblical wisdom on our part, a recognition of the divine presence in humble gifts of bread and wine, and in the assembly. It is our great act of fidelity to Jesus who asked us to do this in memory of him.

May it be not simply a ritual that we perform because we are expected to do so, but a heart-felt act of love for our Lord and Saviour that will in turn help us live in the kingdom and be ready for death or the end of the world, whenever either of those takes place for us.