

**The 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Year A: Being wise and prepared; Remembrance Day.**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Wisdom 6:12-16: The benefit of Wisdom: ‘happy’ living;**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: How Christians should grieve;**

**Gospel: Matthew 25:1-13: Parable of the wise & foolish bridesmaids.**

This Sunday’s first reading is from the Book of Wisdom; to read it off-line, you will need either a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible, as non-RC Bibles treat it as part of the “Apocrypha” – books not in the original Hebrew Bible. “Wisdom” was probably written in Greek by Jews in Egypt less than 100 years before Jesus was born. It has some good turns of phrase – not least, this week’s very poetic piece about the sort of person who can be ‘wise’. This means being not so much intellectually able, as close to God and aware of other people. *“Even to think about Wisdom means your understanding is fully grown; be on the alert for her and anxiety will quickly leave you.”* Weekend newspaper supplements often advise us how to be successful, happy, ‘wise’, etc, but being mainly materialistic, they rarely mention religion. For us, God should be the base of true ‘wisdom’.

In the gospel, Jesus gives a parable of what ‘wisdom’ means in practice. The parable of the ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ bridesmaids is very well-known. The Greek word for these girls is ‘parthenos’, translated often as ‘maiden’ or ‘virgin’. It just means a female adolescent. You’ll know the story: the girls acted as torch-bearers for the bridegroom’s party at a wedding. He was late; everyone dozed off; then they realized they needed more oil for their lamps. Of the ten girls, five had wisely brought extra oil; five had foolishly not bothered. These had to go to a shop to buy some; just then, the bridegroom arrived; the result was that they were locked out of the wedding. Jesus commented at the end of his parable: *“Stay awake, because you do not know the day or the hour.”*

When I was at Ushaw College in the 1960’s, we met an old priest who had studied there before the 1914-18 war. He remembered a bishop preaching a sermon with a warning to the senior students: “When you are in parishes, you must be watchful and prepared. You will have to choose whether to be awake with the wise virgins, or to sleep with the foolish ones.” (The old priest chuckled that the bishop had neither read the parable properly, nor had any sense of humour or irony.) On a slightly more respectable level, the parable is about having the sense to be prepared for the future. In the long run, this means our death, when we are summoned to the ‘wedding feast’ that represents the future Kingdom of Heaven that will exist after this life. The bridegroom stands for Jesus coming in glory at the end of time - and more personally, for each of us, at the end of our lives. The two types of girl in the parable represent two attitudes of mind that apply to us. One is being sensible – aware of the way things work, and prepared to face our future, especially the eventual end of our lives. The other is being foolish – not being bothered about any of these things, then being caught out when the worst happens. This is no great mystery - just common-sense and wisdom.

This Sunday, we think of Remembrance, war & death, and the current fighting in Gaza (after the October 7<sup>th</sup> terror attack on Israel) shows how awful war is. Unless you are a psychopath, you will be horrified at the sight of human suffering on such a scale. This weekend's Remembrance is not a glorification of war: it is the acknowledgement of the debt we owe to the thousands who gave their lives for freedoms we often take for granted. This is not to argue there were no faults on the victors' sides in recent wars; it is just to say that without victory in the two world wars, the world would be a much worse place. I think it is safe to say that the First World War was a morally less clear-cut affair than the Second: in the latter, there was a sense of a moral crusade to stamp out a hideous evil in Europe and the Far East. Having seen what the Nazis did in Eastern Europe, and what the Japanese military did in China, Thailand, Burma and what is now Indonesia, most people offer thanks that the Axis powers were so clearly defeated.

What about the issue of Christian pacifism – that opinion that it is never right to take up arms, in any circumstances? I know that I may offend some readers, but I fear that pacifism is a bit of a 'cop-out'; by that, I mean that it avoids some hard decisions. It is one thing to wish for something good – a peaceful world – but is it right to want this, without also willing the only way of achieving it? That means defending ourselves against wicked people who want, and are able, to destroy us. That said, the Church has for centuries – since St Thomas Aquinas in the 1200's – taught the idea of a 'just war'. This is not an oxymoron, or contradiction in terms: war can be justified morally, but only as long as certain conditions are met – eg, a serious wrong to be avoided or corrected; no alternative strategy; the belief that a good outcome is possible; correct treatment of civilians and prisoners, etc. The various Geneva conventions have codified these rules, and civilized nations accept them. Many countries have chaplaincies, where clergy minister to the spiritual needs of the military services. It is a valuable work.

In a way, all war is the failure of the 'Wisdom' mentioned earlier on. The Vatican Council's 1965 decree 'The Church in the Modern World' says: "Peace is not merely the absence of war, or the balance of power between two opposing forces, or the result of government by tyranny. It is the effect of justice; it is the fruit of the harmony built into human society by its Divine Founder; it is brought about by people when they try to reach an ever more perfect justice. It is the fruit of love, because this goes beyond what even justice can provide." (Section 78)

I know that to many cynics, this sounds like pie-in-the-sky. The problem: what is the alternative? Is the current tit-for-tat vengeance in the Middle East the only way? That no-one is looking for a settlement agreeable to both sides reminds me of the foolish bridesmaids in the parable: it ignores some basic facts of life.  
*Fr Jim Dunne.*

