

A Sunday school teacher was testing the children in her class one morning to see if they understood the concept of “getting to Heaven.” She said, “If I sold my house and my car, held a big garage sale and gave all my money to the Church, would that get me into Heaven?” “NO!” the children answered. “If I cleaned the Church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?” Again, the answer was, “NO!” Well then, if I was kind to animals, gave candy to children and loved my husband, would that get me into Heaven?” Again, they all answered, “NO!” “Well,” the teacher continued, “how do I get into Heaven?” A five year old boy shouted, “YOU GOTTA BE DEAD.”

Death is a certainty. Sooner or later all of us will die. It is wonderful if over the years persons acquire wisdom that results in a meaningful life. It is even greater if by the evening of their life persons have acquired the wisdom that helps them to die a meaningful death.

Physicians, nurses, priests, and ministers take special courses that train them to accompany terminal patients in their last difficult days and hours. But one thing is

certain: if counselors of terminal patients have to depend on human wisdom alone, they have a very difficult task in making the apparent absurdity of death meaningful.

We Christians possess a God-given wisdom that tells us not only that death is a sad and inevitable necessity, but that it has a positive meaning. Christians see death as the optimum opportunity for accepting God and full realization of one's self. In dying with Christ, Christians believe that they will rise with Him. Today's Scripture readings deal with death and the Christian insight that makes it meaningful.

There is a lovely story told about St. Charles Borromeo. One evening he was playing cards with a few of his friends and the subject got around to death and dying. What would you do, it was asked, if all of a sudden it were revealed that you were going to die this very night? One person said: "I'd run off to confession." Another said "I'd get down on my knees and pray." Someone else said: "I would find my lawyer and make sure my will was in good order." Charles kept silent, continuing to look at his cards. Eventually, remarking

on his lack of response, his friends asked him what he would do. "I'd continue to play cards," was his reply. He was ready at any time. I guess that's why Charles Borromeo was a saint. That's the way our Lord tells us we should be in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus gives us the parable of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids to illustrate His teachings about the coming of the Kingdom of God. This parable offers pointed application for the waiting faithful in the early Church as they come to terms with and unexpected delay in the Parousia or the second coming of Jesus Christ, which most expected in their lifetime. We see this situation in our Second Reading from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, which is the earliest of Paul's letters.

When he wrote it, contemporary Christians, including Paul himself, expected Jesus to come very soon – within their lifetime – to rebuild the Kingdom and to establish His glorious reign. So they needed to be vigilant in order not to miss His return. Some quit their jobs and sold all that they possess in the belief that the Kingdom was at hand. But then the years passed and there

seemed to be no signs of the Second Coming. Fears and anxieties started to arise in the Thessalonian community. Paul writes this earliest Christian letter to respond to the community's rising fears and anxieties. Paul helps them to realize that what they need to do is believe in what the Lord has done for us. He doesn't want them to fret. Instead, the Thessalonians should prepare themselves for the Kingdom. The central idea is clear: only the alert and the vigilant would always be ready when Jesus comes back a second time in the Parousia.

The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids represent the Church or Christian community that is waiting for Christ's Second Coming, which could be us at this time becoming again aware of the Parousia as the Season of Advent comes about in a few weeks. The Bridegroom is Christ. The wedding feast is the great and joyous occasion in which Christ comes for His Church. The delay of the bridegroom corresponds to the delay of the Second Coming or the Parousia. The Bridegroom's arrival in the dark of the night is the Second Coming itself. The Bridesmaids represent all of

us waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus. The closing of the door is the final judgment.

The question before us is “What shall we do while we wait?” The answer is: “Make sure you have enough oil for your lamps!” The oil represents something intangible. It represents a relationship with God which must be personally developed and which cannot just be given to someone else any more than any close relationship can. It is not something that one can attain overnight or borrow from someone else as the foolish virgins attempted to do. We either have a relationship with God as son or daughter or we do not. We cannot have a relationship with God because someone else we know or we’re related to does. We have to have it for ourselves.

The oil could stand for character and Christian values which we cannot borrow or buy, which was the foolish Virgins’ choice. That metaphor of “oil” refers to the way we do or do not live the virtuous life that God freely empowers us to live. You cannot “borrow” these virtues at the last moment; you must “live” them. Oil could stand for the “spiritual character” or merits we

have built up by good works, such as concern for the needy and acts of justice. Oil is the spirit of reconciliation with others and a willingness to share our lives and its blessings with others. What our Lord is telling us is that whatever will get us into the Heavenly banquet is intangible, something each of us has to acquire for ourselves.

The parable warns us that there are certain things which cannot be obtained at the last minute, such as good relationship with God, good character, merits from good deeds of sharing and forgiving love and humble service done to others. The parable also warns us of certain elements in Christian life that cannot be borrowed, such as a good and lasting relationship with God, an ideal character, and above all unconditional faith and trust in God.

Spiritual readiness is always a must for all of us as we wait not just the Parousia, but especially when the time comes that God will call us to Himself in death. Jesus exhorts us to always be alert and awake for we do not know the hour nor the day.