

Semper Paratus

November 12, 2017 – Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.

Readings: Wisdom 6.12-16; 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18; Matthew 25.1-13

Semper Paratus (“Always Prepared”) is the motto of the United States Coast Guard. Though it is an excellent expression of the readiness of the armed forces to defend the boundaries of the United States, it is an even more apt motto for the preparation of the individual soul for the particular judgment that occurs after death.

As the Church moves toward the end of the liturgical year of grace, the readings address the theme of the judgment of the soul with ever greater urgency. In today’s case, the image used is that of bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom to come to the house in a Hebrew wedding. As bridesmaids prepare for the coming of the groom, the souls of men must be prepared for the coming of Christ. This entails the light of wisdom in lamps that will scatter the gloom of sin.

Speculative and Practical Wisdom

Wisdom, according to Thomas Aquinas, is a virtue by which one is able to discern all of reality through ultimate causes. Wisdom allows a person to view all the changeable things that occur in life from the supernatural point of view of God. This point of view is natural to the intellect, to be received as a perfection, though it can finally occur only through grace. This is because once one grasps one relationship of cause to effect, the mind cannot be perfected without experiencing the cause of all causes. Our lives are merely a preparation for heaven. In examining the nature of the intellect, one can see that there is a dynamism about knowledge that begins with wonder at the causes of change in the physical world, and this gives the impetus to all philosophy.

Aristotle reflected this fact in the first sentence of his *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know.” This desire is completed in real wisdom, where the causes of causes, God, is directly experienced in knowledge. One cannot attain this completed wisdom here on earth. Though one can know that the one God is the Uncaused Cause and all that entails, only by faith and grace can one actually *experience* this God and so true wisdom. This wisdom is both speculative and practical. “To fix one’s thought on her is perfect understanding, and he who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care” (Wis 6.15). It is real wisdom that allows us to concentrate on what really matters and to be freed from trivial and unimportant things. As St. Elizabeth of Trinity used to say: “Get beyond the secondary causes.” This desire for wisdom leads the soul to “thirst for God” (Ps 62.1). Both theoretical and practical wisdom lead to true preparation for seeing God in himself through Christ.

The Comings of Christ

There are, in fact, two comings of Christ for which the Christian must wisely prepare himself. The first is the one at the hour of death; the second at the Parousia at the end of time. In the years immediately following the departure of Christ for heaven, Christians expected the second coming to happen immediately or at least very soon. Now that man has waited 2,000 years for this event – and while, of course, it could occur at any moment – the important preparation should be for the hour of death. It is hope for the resurrection of the body that sustains us in that preparation. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thes 4.14).

That preparation entails nurturing a third coming of Christ, which is the mystic one in the soul that happens through sanctifying grace. This experience has often been compared to a marriage, and the love that it inspires has been compared to spousal love. Spousal love is one that never takes or seeks to dominate the other. Rather, it is characterized by a complete and total giving and receiving, plunging one into the good of the other, and making the good of the beloved into the good of the lover. The Trinity do this for all eternity, which is why their union is the image for the ideal society and the ideal marriage. In heaven all souls will be virginal and enjoy total union and transformation with God. This begins on earth by the spousal union of the soul with God through faith and grace, a loving exchange of hearts with Jesus.

This brings us to the ten virgins. It is interesting that there is no bride mentioned, only bridesmaids. The coming of the bridegroom for which the virgins prepare lacks the cataclysmic events described in the Second Coming, so we may conclude that it refers to a more sober, quiet, and personal coming: the one after death. The parable speaks only of the relations of the virgins with the bridegroom. They go to his house, but he is delayed. They carry not the more practical torches, but lamps that require oil to replenish them should the bridegroom be delayed. The need to carry more oil shows the necessity for vigilance, for death may come at any time.

Both the wise and foolish virgins are overcome by sleep while awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom, but the wise prudently carry more oil for their lamps, whereas the foolish do not. Their carelessness leaves them basically unprepared when at last the bridegroom comes. The door is shut against them, and they are very definitely rejected by the groom. Christ here is teaching us the absolute necessity of being prepared for his coming at our death.

He has come to dwell in our hearts by grace, which is the transforming love of God. This allows us to know and love God as the knower in the knower and the loved in the lover. God’s love creates the good in those he loves. The first sign of his creative good is that he loves all things into existence. The second is that he makes human beings like himself by having an intellect and will. The third and most perfect form of his love is that he invites us to communion with himself. This invitation is like a marriage, and so the invitation of the bridegroom and the virgins is most apt.

Since, however, the second sign of his love is that he gives us an intellect and will, his one requirement is that the Christian be prepared in freedom to accept the third transformation, to consent to being loved in this way. The requirement of consent is called preparation, and it is accomplished with the cooperation of the person in the actual grace of God moving him. The initial Christian conversion can occur to an infant in baptism, though he has no free choices. A baby cannot make acts of preparation, of course, nor can he deny such acts and reject them. But when he reaches the age of reason, the preparation of freedom to live according to the transformation in Christ already introduced into the soul at baptism then takes place.

Preparing Prudently

Prudent Christians who are wise, not only theoretically but practically, must take all the means offered by Christ, especially in the Mass and the sacraments, to grow in that preparation and thus in grace and transformation. Unfortunately, this can be marred by mortal sin, through which grace is lost.

Lukewarm Catholics do not take seriously either the thirst for God at the very core of the human soul or the fact that our nature pines for him “like a dry weary land without water.” Instead of taking the necessary means to repent from sin offered by the Church – recourse to the sacrament of Penance and the passionate desire to “gaze on him in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory” – they, like the foolish virgins, do not make prudent provision for being watchful always. Perhaps they think they can always repent at the hour of death, and God willing they will. But the Lord is clear that then the cry, “Lord, Lord open the door for us,” will do no good if they are caught unaware. Today people often die in situations where well-meaning medical professionals and family have hidden from them the truth about their imminent death, and so they may die unprepared.

Much better to be always prepared – *Semper Paratus*, as the motto says – because we do not know when our lives will be required of us. And not just because of fear of hell or rejection, but out of wisdom and love for the Bridegroom.

There was a religious sister who spent three years suffering from bone cancer. She had all that time to prepare for death, and she used to describe her death as a long, tree-lined drive. She would be at one end as the prudent virgin dressed in her bridal gown, and Christ would be at the other. She said her death would be running down the tree-lined drive and jumping into the arms of Jesus, whom as her spouse she had so loved and longed to see throughout her life. This is wise and prudent preparation. When the Lord came for her presumably she did not find the door barred and was invited to share in the wedding feast.

The sacraments are given to us for such preparation. Don't let your lamps run out of oil while waiting. Bring with you the oil of truth and gladness, which leads to true repentance.

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For Further Reading

St. Augustine, [Sermon XCIII](#)

Bishop William P. Callahan, [“Three Comings of Christ in One Liturgical Season”](#)

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##668-682](#)

[“The Divine Mercy and the Second Coming”](#)

Randall Smith, [“Is the Second Coming Still Coming?”](#)

In Short . . .

- ***Wisdom allows a person to view all the changeable things that occur in life from the supernatural point of view of God.***
- ***Though we can know that the one God is the Uncaused Cause and all that entails, only by faith and grace can we actually experience this God and so true wisdom.***
- ***There are two comings of Christ for which the Christian must wisely prepare himself: the hour of death and the Parousia at the end of time.***
- ***Our preparation entails nurturing a third coming of Christ, the mystic one in the soul that happens through sanctifying grace.***
- ***Prudent Christians must take all the means offered by Christ, especially in the Mass and the sacraments, to grow in their preparation and thus in grace and transformation.***