

## NOVEMBER 6, 2011: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 6:12-16 I Thessalonians 4:13-18 Matthew 25:1-13

One of the most difficult things for new Scripture students to accept is that some of what most Christians believe today wasn't believed by some of the faith communities for whom our sacred authors wrote. Today's I Thessalonians passage provides a classic example.

Already in my first grade religion classes, back in 1945, I learned what happens when we leave this earth. The instant we die we'll face a "particular" judgment. God will review our entire life, and decide whether we go to heaven, hell, or purgatory. Then, when Jesus returns in the Parousia, everyone who's ever lived will undergo a "general" judgment, similar to the particular judgment, but now everyone will be able to find out where everyone else ends up. Sadly, purgatory will be eliminated. We'll spend eternity in heaven or hell.

Though I presumed God hand-delivered this after-life scenario exactly as I learned it, I later discovered this precise sequence is found no place in Scripture. As a matter of fact, in the earliest Christian writing we possess - I Thessalonians - Paul provides his community with a belief few of us would accept today, a belief later contradicted by other biblical authors.

It seems the first Christians were convinced no follower of Jesus would die before he returned in the Second Coming. That's why there was consternation in Thessalonica when someone walked into a room one morning and discovered a dead Christian. Would the deceased miss out on being with the risen and returned Jesus when he finally arrived triumphant on earth? Or, if they did take part, would they be relegated to the "end of the line" when the heavenly goodies were passed out?

As we hear today, Paul's convinced those who have died won't bring up the rear; the living "will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep." But the Apostle presumes the dead will have to pass the interval between their demise and Jesus' Parousia lying peacefully in their graves. There's no particular judgment.

About 35 years after I Thessalonians, when we get to Luke's Acts of the Apostles narrative of Stephen's martyrdom, do we first hear about Jesus coming to meet the faithful at the moment of death. (That's why Luke's Jesus can assure the good thief, "This day you will be with me in paradise!" If there were a good thief in Matthew and Mark, Jesus would probably say, "You'll have to spend a little time in the grave, but then, when I return, you'll be with me in paradise.")

In our bridesmaids pericope Jesus is more concerned with what's happening now than what will take place when we die. Though most interpret "kingdom of heaven" as a synonym for where we hope to spend eternity, Scripture scholars constantly remind us it's one of the gospel-Jesus' terms for God working effectively in our lives right here and now. Jesus teaches that only the "properly prepared" will be able to experience God in their day by day lives. For the rest, it's like being outside a closed and locked door. (One must read Matthew's prior 24 chapters to discover how a "wise bridesmaid" prepares to welcome the bridegroom.)

Though some might be disturbed to find Scripture isn't as specific on life after death as we would like, perhaps our Wisdom author can help cushion our discomfort. He or she is convinced our purpose in life isn't to have all the answers, but to engage in a constant quest to discover the essential role God plays in everything we do and are. True wisdom consists in such a day by day endeavor. "Taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence, and whoever for her sake keeps vigil shall quickly be free from care \_\_\_\_\_"

I presume there are still things to discover about the after-life. But only the "wise" will engage in the quest.

## NOVEMBER 13, 2011: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 31:10-13,19-20,30-31 I Thessalonians 5:1-6 Matthew 25:14-30

The earliest followers of Jesus eventually discovered they had to answer an important question. What did he expect them to do while they waited for him to return?

It's clear from today's I Thessalonians passage that they thought his Parousia would take place very soon. One of the reasons Paul writes this letter is to address the anxieties of those who have difficulty handling the delay in Jesus' triumphant return. It seems almost everyone has an opinion about what "time or season" would be the time or season in which he'd finally come.

The Apostle first assures his friends that, in spite of the delay, the "day of the Lord" will certainly come. But, like labor pains and home break-ins, it's almost impossible to predict an exact time. Those trying to develop "formulas" for pinpointing the Parousia are wasting their time.

On the other hand, Christians aren't just to sit around all day twiddling their thumbs, looking at the sky. Paul says, "You are children of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. Let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober." In other words, "We've got work to do!" One need only glance at Paul's letters to learn how alert and sober people should be filling their day.

No doubt he (and lots of husbands) would be happy with our Proverbs picture of the "worthy wife."

She certainly doesn't spend her day watching the soaps or playing bridge. Not only is she occupied in doing things which benefit her family, she also "reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy." Just in case we don't get the message, the writer ends by reminding us, "Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting; the woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised."

It's up to Matthew's Jesus to give us a somewhat different twist on how we're to spend our time. This parable is so well-known that the word designating an ancient middle-East coin - a talent - eventually morphed into a term designating an individual's natural, God-given gifts.

No one can miss the point: God expects us to develop and increase our talents. But Jesus' parable goes deeper than just that surface message. Notice how the one-talented slave defends his inaction: "Out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground."

There's always a risk in using and expanding the gifts God gives us. We could use them to go in the wrong direction. Jesus doesn't want such a fear to stop us from employing our gifts to open new doors for ourselves and others along our life's path. It depends on whether we choose to focus on the risk or the better future.

A former coach of our local NFL franchise, frustrated by his quarterback's habit of throwing interceptions, had his video staff string together all the unfortunate individual's mistakes, then forced the embarrassed player to watch them. He eventually threw more interceptions that year than he had the year before.

The next year the team's new coach also forced the quarterback to watch a video of his performance. But this time it chronicled all his completions. That was the year he led his team to the playoffs.

Pope John XXIII took a big risk beginning in 1958 when he led us down an unfamiliar road. He used his unique personality to halt his church's 400 year old stance of arguing with non-Catholic religions. Quite a risk for an organization which found great security in maintaining such a polemic.

I thank God for John's courage in taking that risk, especially when Protestant ministers tell me these commentaries help in their homily preparation.

Fearless leaders are certainly a gift from God.