

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Malachi 1, 14b-2,2b. 8-10; Matthew 23, 1-12*) In our first reading we hear from Malachi the prophet. Malachi means “my messenger.” Nothing else is known about him personally. He was a real “fire and brimstone” prophet. The priests of the Temple received his condemnation when they taught the people : “every evildoer is good in the sight of the Lord, and God is pleased with him.” (Mal.2,17) When God gives commands he expects people to follow them. Animals offered to God in sacrifice were to be perfect – but the priest accepted sick, blind or lame animals to offer to God. The people cheated God in other ways too while the priests did not teach them rightly.

Malachi’s preaching goes back about 500 years before Christ. It has been chosen to prepare us to hear Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders of his own day.

Placed between the passage from Malachi and the gospel is the second reading, the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. This is especially a historical document in that it is the first document in the New Testament that was written. When Paul started his letter, he was starting the New Testament. Paul is trying to tell the Christians of Thessalonica how they are to live as they await the second coming of Christ, which they anticipated was to happen in a very short time.

**HOMILY:** As we listen to Jesus in today’s gospel we hear him telling the people to learn from their leaders but not to imitate them because for many of them, religion has become a show and was not in their heart. There are several examples of how shallow the scribes and Pharisees and Jewish priests were. I don’t feel there is any need to repeat what Jesus just said – how they make themselves feel as if they were superior to everyone else by their fancy robes and how they are catered to by others.

I would like to consider one thing Jesus said. Jesus said “call no one on earth your father.” Sometimes this is an issue between Catholics and some Protestants. Jesus did teach us we could call God our Father when we prayed. But did Jesus intend to be taken literally when he said “call no man on earth your father?” Then we might ask what should we call our father? And to be politically correct, does that mean we should have a special word for our mother too? I don’t think Jesus meant to be taken literally. I think that Jesus meant for us not to forget that although we have an earthly father, we also have a heavenly Father who has given us life and who is above all of us. We even heard the prophet say in our first reading “Have we not all the one father?” In our second reading Paul today tells the Thessalonians he treated them as a loving parent would treat his or her child for Paul said “we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children.” Four verses later Paul said “As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his children” (I Thess.2,11) If Jesus was forbidding the use of the term father, Paul would surely have known about it and would have used another word here and in many dozen other places when it is used in the Bible. As I said, Jesus doesn’t want us to forget our heavenly Father who is over all of us, a Father who loves us and teaches us.

As a title I consider it very special to me and I try, to the best of my ability not to lord it over people but to live up to it in a pastoral way when I am called to minister to those whom I have been sent to serve. What the Pharisees and scribes were doing was to use their titles and their robes and their knowledge of the Law to exult themselves rather than to lead God’s people to God.

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Wisdom 6, 12-16; Matthew 25, 1-13*) Greek culture has a long tradition – for example Homer lived about 750 years before Christ, Plato and Aristotle lived four and five centuries BC – but Greek culture really began to flourish when Alexander the Great showed up on the scene. Alexander was born in 357 and died at the age of 34, but in a short 13 years he defeated the Persians and built an empire that stretched from Macedonia and Greece and Egypt to the borders of India. Wisdom literature in the Middle East is even more ancient, going back almost 1000 years before Christ. The wisdom literature of the various nations expressed practical insights about manners, morality and the mysteries of life. Jewish wisdom writings took many of these insights and combined them with the wisdom of God’s laws. With wisdom from the Scriptures, Jewish wisdom offered a more profound view of life and how to live it. Our first reading is from the Book of Wisdom and was written perhaps about 50 years before Christ, probably in Egypt. It was written in the language of those times, Greek. Since it was not composed in Hebrew, you will not find it in the Protestant Bible. The Catholic Church, however, accepts it as inspired. Our first reading tells us wisdom is available for anyone who diligently seeks it with honesty and openness. But those who find the search for wisdom too much trouble will be deprived of it. A theme we hear again in the gospel.

**HOMILY:** At the time of Jesus, “engagement or betrothal was taken very seriously and it had legal consequences. The usual custom seems to have been arranged through elders in the family, especially the parents. The parties were generally young by today’s Western standards... Apart from forbidden degrees of kinship it was customary to marry within tribes or families.

“The betrothal took place at the home of the father of the bride (where she continued living after the betrothal ceremony). At the betrothal ceremony the husband presented the wife (and her father) with the marriage contract and the so-called bride-price. One or several years might separate the betrothal ceremony from the actual marriage ceremony. The marriage ceremony consisted in the transfer of the bride from her father’s home to that of the groom’s home.”  
(*Sacra Pagina, Matthew, Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, pg 36-37*)

We will hear more about this custom in a few weeks as we prepare for Christmas. The betrothal ceremony between Joseph and Mary had already taken place and they were awaiting the wedding ceremony. “Mary remains at the home of her parents, and Joseph visits that household from time to time.”

So, in today’s parable, the groom was on his way to the bride’s house to take her back to his. Perhaps he was detained by having a few drinks with his future father in law, or he was trying to work out what gifts he was expected to give to the bride’s family. The virgins would meet him once they saw him coming and they would lead him in procession along with his future spouse to his home then they would be married and the party would begin (and would last for a few days)

So what is the point of this story? It seems quite clear. Our first reading on wisdom tells us something that is very common sense: a wise person prepares ahead of time for some important event. We’ve all experienced embarrassing or even disastrous times when we were unprepared for something (occasionally the teacher had a pop quiz in school and I was

unprepared). Here is the best part of this common sense truth about being prepared: if we seek wisdom, it will be found by those who seek her (wisdom is personified as a woman).

The oil in the lamps of the virgins was something that could not be transferred. Many scholars tell us that the oil was a symbol of good works that a person has performed. This also is a universal principal in life - we get no credit for the good works another person has done. This is true in all religions. The last point this parable emphasizes is what is to happen at the end of time (scholars have a nice word for that: eschatological). The bridegroom and central person in this story is Jesus and Jesus is going to come again at the end of time. We wait for him to come again and establish the Kingdom of God in a new world where there will be no more sickness or sadness, war or suffering, poverty or pain. We are the ones in the story waiting for him to come and indeed he will come in an individual way for each of us and he will come in a universal way some day. Those who had prepared will be invited into Christ's eternal banquet. Those who were not prepared will lose out.

The moral of the story is "watch therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour" of Christ's return. A wise person will keep himself or herself ready to meet Christ as any time. Amen.

### **33<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary – A Cycle**

**November 19, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading from the Book of Proverbs is a collection of writings meant to help people search for and find wisdom. Today's passage describes the ideal wife, one who exemplifies all the elements of wisdom. The passage is meant to lead us into a parable about three servants: two of whom were wise and a third who was not.

**HOMILY:** Our gospel begins by telling us a man going on a journey – Jesus could have been easily talking about himself. In the chronology of St. Luke, it would just be a matter of days and Jesus would be arrested, tortured and put to death. And so he leaves with his apostles some of his possessions so they could continue his work. In the parable, what the traveler left were talents.

I think immediately of his giving them talents to preach, to heal, to forgive sins, to cast out demons, to prophesize, but Jesus doesn't want us to think of his story in those terms yet. That's too spiritual and the story is about money. We will get ahead of ourselves if we make it too spiritual right away.. So, going back to the story, what the Master gives is something vague. He gave talents. Now, talents were not vague things – they were weights but the story doesn't tell us whether they were gold or silver – that might be a difference between a million dollars or a thousand dollars the traveler was handing out and that's where it is vague. But that point isn't of great importance. What is important is what these three servants do with what has been given to them. That is so important in fact that the man sizes up his servants and hands out his possessions to each according to his ability. He knew what each was capable of and knew what to expect when he returned.

So the man's return is important. It wasn't important to get his money returned, because in the end he made a gift of it to his first two servants. Maybe he was just in a hurry to get home. Here's what is important to the story is what his servants could accomplish while he was gone. And so, two accomplished according to their potential – one did not. The one who did not takes up most of the story. We would judge that he was acting prudent. The master's money would be safe. Maybe the master saw something we are not able to see – that the servant really was

lazy. At any rate, the Master knew there would be no benefit to anyone if the money just lay in the ground, like a big, useless lump of mud. So he gave the talent to the one who had ten.

There is a tendency for Christians to claim they have no talents. What gifts has God given you to help spread his kingdom: is it joy, is it thankfulness, is it generosity, is it hope, or faith, or time to pray, or time to spend in visiting or helping a relation or a friend, or whatever.

Remember he is going to return some day and he will want to know what we did with the blessings he left with us. Amen.

## **Christ the King – A Cycle**

**November 26, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Ezekiel 34, 11-12. 15-17; I Cor. 15, 20-26.28; Matthew 25, 31-46*) Today we honor Christ as our King. Our scripture readings do not picture him as a typical king. In our first reading, Ezekiel, the prophet, pictures God as a shepherd. God is distressed with the shepherds of his people; i.e., the kings and religious leaders. They led God's people away from God and to eventual disaster at the time of the Babylonian invasion. God said he himself would lead them rightly. We see this prophecy perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. In our second reading, the whole 15<sup>th</sup> chapter from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, from which our reading is taken, is on the topic of the resurrection. Paul tells us the risen Jesus will reign until evil in every form has been destroyed. Then Jesus will turn the kingdom over to the Father. In the gospel Jesus is pictured as a judge, a judge who judges us on how we behave toward the lowly and the poor. Thus we have three images of Christ the King: a shepherd, the risen Lord and the judge of all nations.

**HOMILY:** In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' first major sermon is the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with the beatitudes, one of which is: "blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." Today's gospel is the last of Jesus' major sermons in Matthew, and it dramatically portrays what Jesus means by "blessed are the merciful."

Today's gospel is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. It tells us, first of all, that at the end of time there will be only two kingdoms: the kingdom of God where there will be happiness beyond anything we can imagine and there will be the kingdom of Satan where there will be endless remorse and suffering. Notice that we're the ones who make the decision as to which kingdom we will belong – we make that choice not by what we say but by the way we live. Karma is a reality.

The parable tells us about who Jesus is. He is the Son of Man, a mysterious heavenly being to whom God grants dominion, glory and kingship (Daniel 7,14). Jesus has God for his Father (Mt. 25,34) He is called "king," which indicates Messiah and Son of David in Matthew and is also called "Lord" (Mt. 25, 37). He is both judge and shepherd. Jesus' identity was hidden, except in the things that he did (forgiving sins, interpreting the Law, healing the sick, raising the dead and various other miracles), but here Jesus appears in all his glory.

The usual interpretation of today's gospel is that "all the nations" need to respond to the needs of people experiencing some form of distress, "these least brothers of mine." A person might ask, "What about going to Church on Sunday?" What about the other commandments? Aren't those things important? Of course they are. Jesus did say the first and greatest commandment is to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. Loving God involves more

than giving a sandwich to a hungry person or giving a cup of water to a thirsty person. It does include that, but it also includes prayer and worship and keeping the commandments. "If you love me you will keep my commandments," Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper.

One commentator, Fr. Daniel Harrington, had a different interpretation for today's gospel. His interpretation asks what do these two phrases mean: "all the nations," and "these least brothers of mine." He points out when Matthew speaks of all the nations in other places in his gospel, he is speaking of the Gentiles - those who are not Jewish or are not identified as the people of God. When he speaks of the least of his brothers he is talking about Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. If these translations are correct, the passage is about Jesus judging Gentiles and how they treated Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. Is this an important question for us? It certainly is a question frequently asked these days: "Can non-Christians get into heaven?" According to Fr. Harrington, this is one of the very few texts in Scripture that deals with the salvation of non-Christians and how they can be saved. They are saved by the way they treat Christian missionaries or ordinary Christians. Why is that so? Because such acts of kindness are done for Christ himself. "Whoever receives you, receives me and whoever receives me, receives him who sent me," Jesus said to his disciples when he sent them out to preach. Well then, does the parable teach us anything about what is expected of us - we who are Christians. We have lots of instructions, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, the Catechism, the lives of saints who are great examples of love of others. If Gentiles are expected to show kindness for God's people, how much more are we expected to show kindness to others.

One last thought about this gospel. It gave me some insight into why heaven will be such a happy place. Consider the kind of people God invites into his kingdom - people who care about others, not people whose care is only about themselves. If you were surrounded only by people who were caring and loving people, wouldn't life be much more pleasant? Amen.