

32nd Sunday (A)

12th November 2023

‘Waiting with hope ...’

Wis 6: *be on the alert for her, and anxiety will quickly leave you*

Ps 62: *My soul is thirsting for God*

1Thess 4: *We want you to be quite certain about those who have died ...*

Mt 25: 1–13: *Stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour!*

So, we’re now into the *last chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel* that we’ll be hearing from in this Church year (Year ‘A,’ the year of Matthew), namely Mt 25. There are 3 hugely important passages in Mt 25: (i) this parable of the wise and foolish maidens; (ii) the parable of the talents; and, (iii) finally, for the feast of Christ the King, the parable of separating the sheep and the goats, representing the Last Judgment of the King of the Universe. Together, these three parables form a *trptych*, a 3-fold image of the end-times, a triple aspect of waiting for the end of the world: the final victory of Christ and the gathering-in of His people into the Kingdom. When is the end of the world to come? Who knows? — that privileged information is not revealed to us by Jesus, so the Church has always resisted such speculation and batted-away such invented timescales as millenarianism which imagined that the end of the world would come in, say, 1000AD (or 2000AD). Instead, our

Christian lives, and the life of the Church — and indeed of all humanity, and the universe of which we are a part — seems to be a lot about ‘waiting,’ doesn’t it? Waiting can be humanly frustrating; and yet waiting can also be profitable, if we accept the slowing-down, get on top of our impatience, allow our soul to mature, and exercise some real Christian hope.

Our Lord’s parable today of the wise and foolish maidens exemplifies the dilemma. The ten of them were waiting, but they were getting tired of waiting! They were getting sleepy, because the bridegroom still hadn’t arrived, he was keeping them waiting as his attendants. And yet ... their whole purpose was to be *ready and waiting* for him to come. But some of them were not: when the time finally came, their lamps were out, they had no oil, they weren’t ready, and they ended up locked out, unable to share in their Master’s happiness.

Our Lord, of course, is the bridegroom that they were awaiting — in fact, Jesus Himself features as the central character in pretty much every parable (that’s part

of the point, and the key to unlocking the parables!) ... And we are His attendants, the ones supposed to be devoted to Him, ready to do His will, ready to welcome Him when He comes again. Waiting, Jesus suggests — waiting with faith and hope — is part of being His people. Think of that little line we hear always at Mass, just before Holy Communion: “*as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.*” It should be ingrained in us to “wait and hope,” for the Lord is in no hurry, and He acts as He knows is right. We should all be like the wise maidens, who allow the Lord to act in His own time, to come to us when He sees fit — and who spend the time not idly drifting off, but focussed, alert, mindful of the task: to love, adore & serve the Son of God.

How might we interpret and live out this ‘waiting well,’ this wise anticipation? I think that it can only be best lived out by *patient prayer*. What is it for the wise maidens to keep their lamps trimmed, lit, and full of oil, if not an image of keeping their spirits fanned into a flame by a life of prayer and grace? Oil is often an image of the

Holy Spirit, isn’t it? — think of the oil used in the sacraments, especially the sacred and fragrant Oil of Chrism used in Confirmation. So, in order to be patient, hopeful, tranquil through life, especially when life is tough, uncertain, fragile — in order, in other words, to be ‘ready and waiting’ — we need to be constantly ‘topped up’ with the Holy Spirit: we need to keep our hearts and minds focussed on our loving Saviour who constantly wants to shower on us the gifts of His Spirit. Prayer is *always* the key; prayer daily and heartfelt; prayer patient and regular; quiet, simple and trusting. Prayer is definitely what will help us to match the pace of our lives with the Lord who is patient, loving, and who desires that our hearts beat in steady rhythm with His Sacred Heart. Prayer — the timelessness of it, the patient submission that it involves — is the best possible fit for the attitude of soul that we need to understand and ‘cope with’ the wait. A student said the other day that when she started taking her faith seriously, just a few yrs ago, she did struggle at first with prolonged periods of quiet Adoration, but that now it’s part and parcel

of her Christian prayer life, and she could not do without it! She has a friend who just can't get her head around prayer, and who is astounded that this Catholic can just 'sit and do nothing,' seemingly, for such protracted periods! And yet, it's the waiting-on in prayer that is our truly Christian exercise, the antidote to the selfish pursuit of the ego which imagines that our life is won ultimately by our activity. Of course prayer is not all we do — of course we work long and hard for the Kingdom — but if we do not do so from a perspective that is a prayerful waiting, then we do so in vain and to no great purpose. Our other Christian devotions and activities — for love of God and love of neighbour — only get their fuel from the prayer time that shows that we wait on God, on God's timing, and on God's grace and gifts. I suggest that if you are not yet someone who consciously gives real time to God in Adoration & prayer — perhaps because you are scared of the 'waste of time' it might seem to you — then you deliberately try it out. Here in the Chapel we offer several times each week for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament together: time to

be with others in quiet contemplation of Jesus in His sacred presence. Yes, you, busy students with social lives and assignment deadlines, you *can* give time to quiet Adoration, and you'll see that others do to, and want to! You can wait on the Lord in prayer — in fact, there's *nothing* more valuable to do, in training yourself for your life ahead! Adoration times, let me remind you, are: (i) 6–7pm Sunday evening, before the evening Mass (+ Confessions); (ii) 6–9pm Tuesday evening (+ Benediction 9pm); (iii) 7.30–8.30pm alternate Thursdays (+ intermittent readings & music) incl. this Thurs. These are precious times to be together in chapel with the Lord's Most Holy Sacrament exposed on the altar for our watching and waiting and adoring. This *is* our training, this is our learning to be *wise maidens*, staying awake, watchful for the bridegroom to come, whenever He may come. *Now* is the time to get into this habit of prayer, and especially of Adoration: now, at Newman House, as a university student. Now, whilst you're training your mind in all sorts of other ways in your academic discipline — and maybe your body,

too, in sports or at the gym — you need to train your *soul*, your heart that is made for God! Prayer and Adoration are the *gym* of the soul, the *lecture-hall* of the heart: here you will learn to be patient and to wait on the Lord for His purpose and His will. Don't be matured in mind and body and immature and untrained in soul — what a waste that would be! Please, this is your Chaplaincy, your university Chapel, come and use it more and more to come in, be with Jesus and to accept His patient course of drawing you on.

Let's accept in faith the 'waiting' that life throws up: let's learn whatever lessons the Lord is teaching us when He seems to keep us waiting. Let's respond as wise, and not as foolish, followers. Let be *attendants*, ones who truly wait and serve; let's use the time we have been given at university as a time of greater simplicity — less rush, less to busy ourselves with, less to go to and spend on — with a wisdom that comes from Christ. Let's turn to prayer again and again, to keep that flame of faith burning bright, alive and alight; let's implore the Lord to keep us topped up with the Spirit, not fazed, distracted, dozy, or drifting. Let's be

brightly burning lamps, sources of holy light for others, especially if they are finding it difficult to cope.

Here's a beautiful prayer I found a while ago, during the pandemic — a time of great and prolonged waiting! — and which spoke to me strongly then of God's sustaining us in that great virtue of Christian patience:

Teach me, my Lord, to be sweet and gentle in all the events of my life, in disappointments, in the thoughtlessness of others, in the insincerity of those I trusted, in the unfaithfulness of those on whom I relied.

Let me forget myself so that I may enjoy the happiness of others. Let me always hide my little pains and heartaches so that I may be the only one to suffer from them. Teach me to profit by the suffering that comes across my path.

Let me so use it that it may mellow me, not harden or embitter me; that it may make me patient, not irritable; that it may make me broad in my forgiveness, not narrow or proud or overbearing.

May no one be less good for having come within my influence; no one less pure, less true, less kind, less noble, for having been a fellow traveller with me on our journey towards eternal life.

As I meet with one cross after another, let me whisper a word of love to You. May my life be lived in the supernatural, full of power for good, and strong in its purpose of sanctity. Amen.