

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – November 12, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 and 11am Sunday Masses – 1,100 words

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins reminds us about the finality of death. In that moment, no one else can help us: either we are ready or not; moreover, we “know neither the day nor the hour”. Up until the Lord comes for us we can be helped by others; once he comes, though, we can only answer for ourselves. This week, we can reflect on how it is that we might help each other to prepare for death, so that we all might be ready for that moment when we will be alone and face-to-face with the good God.

The matter of helping others die well was once a theme that captivated an entire continent. In Europe, in the late Middle Ages, there was, in fact, a handbook for Christian death that was translated into every language and read by countless people; it also gave rise to a literary genre. We refer to that genre as the *ars moriendi* – the art of dying. These guides not only helped individuals to avoid certain spiritual temptations that are sometimes greater as one lays dying, but also exhorted them to imitate Christ and prepare well for that inevitable moment. For the family and friends, it gave them instructions on how to help the person in his last agony – from what to say to what to do – to help ensure that the person would die in God’s good grace.

The challenge that we face today is that of living in a society that avoids death and, in fact, greatly fears it. Many of us grew up sheltered from the reality of death, not being taken to funerals; then, whenever the topic was unavoidable, perhaps we were nevertheless sheltered by the use of euphemisms about death and dying. This avoidance of reality can be seen even in how we sometimes try to comfort one another with untruths, such as saying that someone has “gotten his wings” when he has died – as if he became an angel, which no human being can do! It is not at all uncommon at funerals for family and clergy alike to speak of the deceased as certainly being in heaven, passing a judgment which is only God’s to make – as if the purification that most of us will need in Purgatory were now a thing of the past! Yes, we tend rather studiously to avoid squarely facing the reality of death and dying, whether we choose simply not to think about it at all, or seek consolation in half-truths and untruths. And this does not serve anyone well.

How, then, while we still have the time to help each other, can we best do so? Well, just as whole books have been written about this, I could say a great deal now. But I want to focus in on that time when death is fast approaching, when often the person who is dying can no longer help himself, and when the family is in a unique position to help.

The first thing is that family or friends should not wait until it’s too late to call a priest. By “too late” I mean: after the person has already gone unconscious, or even after he has died. Of course, sometimes this is not possible – sometimes the person falls unconscious quite suddenly; but whenever it is possible, do not wait! We need to get over any hang-ups or superstitions that we may have, to the effect that if the priest comes then the person will die soon. No! What a consolation it would be for them to receive the sacraments while still conscious, while still being able to experience the peace they bring! Every priest bears within his heart the sadness of having arrived too late for some people – not because he delayed in going, but because the family delayed in calling. Please, give your next of kin clear instructions about your expectations in this regard so that when the time comes, they will know what to do – especially if they are not Catholic or not sure about how to reach a priest in an emergency situation.

The second thing is to remember that we do have an enemy of our soul who will tempt us whenever it is opportune, and the process of dying is indeed an opportune time. Sometimes the dying will suddenly not want to see a priest, perhaps because they are filled with a sense of dread about their judgment or fear over some sin they once committed. We all experience this in an

analogous way at other moments in our lives – perhaps dread of taking a certain medicine: we know it will help, but we also know that it will taste gross and produce temporary unpleasant side-effects, so perhaps we avoid it. Well, spiritualize and magnify that and realize that sometimes you need to go ahead and call the priest even when the one dying insists that it is not necessary.

A third and final bit of advice for helping others at their crucial moment is to vacate when the priest arrives. Let him have some time to speak to the dying person privately. It may be that the person needs or simply desires to go to confession but might be too embarrassed to admit that in front of family and friends gathered around. It may be that they have some other thing they wish to discuss with the priest. Usually, the priest will have the entire family back in for those things that can be done with others around – such as the anointing, the apostolic pardon, viaticum, the prayers for the dying, and so forth. But be sure to facilitate some privacy when he first arrives.

Our readings this Sunday speak of wisdom: that spiritual gift that enables us to see the deeper meaning in things, to see as God sees. We need to pray for that wisdom especially about this matter of dying well. From the manner in which we help others to the way in which we prepare ourselves, this is something of a lost art, waiting to be rediscovered in a world that does not want to face the reality of death. We wish to be both wise and ready: and we wish, please God, to help others in that as well. May he help us this week to reflect profitably on this area of our lives and make the necessary resolutions, plans, and instructions so that when the time comes – and it most certainly will! – we will be ready with lighted lamp to go out and meet our Lord.