Columnists

The wise are always prepared

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's readings: (R3) Matthew 25:1-13; (R1) Wisdom 6:12-16; (R2) 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The thought of death, the end of earthly life, a call to readiness pervade Sunday's readings. The second reading, in fact, is often selected for funeral Masses. In it, St. Paul speaks of death as a sleep. In so speaking, he follows Christ. When Lazarus had died, Jesus said, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps." Even our word cemetery comes from the Greek *koimeterion*, meaning "a sleeping chamber." Cemeteries are dormitories.

Christians can talk like that because they believe "Jesus died and rose and so shall all those also who have fallen asleep believing in Him" (R2)

St. Paul told his Thessalonians not to grieve over their dead like those who have no hope. The Gospel tells us two things are certain: death and the uncertainty of the exact hour of death — "you know not the day or the hour." So the point of the parable is be sensible — hear and keep the words of Jesus; don't be fools and ignore them. Two extremes are to be avoided — indifference about the Lord's coming or overconcern about it.

The Gospel parable originally referred to Jesus; He is the wisdom, the groom. He walked the streets and invited followers, the bridesmaids. He offered a choice — to accept or reject Him. Sensible people followed Him; fools did not. For Matthew, however, the emphasis had shifted from the first coming of Jesus to His final coming, the parousia. The bridesmaids now are we, His followers.

We shouldn't make too much of the fact that the wise refused to share their oil with the foolish. There are just some things we cannot share. A singer cannot give his or her voice to another. A student cannot learn for another. Nor should we make too much of the fact that all fell asleep — especially since the point of the parable is watchfulness. The point is still clear: asleep or awake, the wise are always prepared.

Remember, too, "falling asleep" can mean death. All falling asleep means all died. With death, the night comes when no one can work, or get more oil. The coming of the groom is the judgment after death.

How can one be prepared? By having enough oil set aside. And what is the oil? It

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is good works. How does one measure good works? In 1979, Mother Teresa of Calcutta won the Nobel Peace Prize. Why? Here was the tally of her good works: 75,000 children educated in her schools; 960,000 people cared for in her dispensaries; 47,000 lepers looked after in 54 clinics; 1,600 orphans brought up in 20 homes; 3,400 dying or destitute people ministered to in 23 houses.

During his 35 years as a priest and bishop, St. Anthony Mary Claret (1807-1870) preached 25,000 sermons; wrote 144 books; validated 9,000 marriages; confirmed more than 300,000; preached three or four missions in every one of the parishes of his diocese of Santiago de Cuba.

What are our good works? For mothers and fathers, it is to restore family life. For the laity in general, it is to penetrate and permeate the world — not the sanctuary — with the Gospel message. We are more than 50 million Catholics. Why is America secular, not Christian? We need more Danny Thomases, Buckleys, Plavarottis, Douglas Hydes, Phyllis Schlaflys, et al. We need more social advocacy — not just for the poor, but for our Catholic schools as well. We need Catholic schools to pump Christian leaders into society. Why should any Catholic school close? Why? What a shame on our faith that we stand by and watch them die!

What's the purpose of our good works? What's the purpose of oil? To light a light. Didn't Jesus say, "Your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16)?

The closest thing to a villian in an Oscar Hammerstein musical was Jed in *Oklahoma*. When he was dead, his "villainy" was exposed — he loved his fellowmen, but he never let it show. Faith without good works is as dead as poor Jed.

The strange visions of Ezekiel

By Cindy Bassett

My name is Ezekiel. I lived a long time ago in the city of Jerusalem near the beautiful temple King Solomon built to the glory of God. Perhaps the temple inspired me, for by the time I was 25, I had decided to serve God as a priest there. But it wasn't long before I discovered that the Lord had a different plan for me.

Five years later, I was a prisoner of war, being held in a camp near the Chebar River in Babylon. All that remained of my dream of priesthood was rubble — Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and so had the magnificent temple.

Why had God allowed such a thing to happen? The Hebrews were His chosen people. What would become of us now in this foreign land? As I pondered these thoughts, my first strange vision occurred. I looked up in the sky and saw a huge cloud directly overhead. The center of the cloud glowed with such fire that soon the entire sky was too bright to look at. Suddenly, I realized that I was in the presence of the Almighty God, and I fell face down on the ground.

"Son of dust, I am sending you to the nation of Israel, to a people rebelling against me," the Lord said. "I am appointing you, Ezekiel, as a watchman for my people. Many will scorn you and ignore my messages, but if the watchman doesn't warn the people, I will hold him responsible for their deaths."

Things happened just as the Lord had told me. Many of the Hebrews ridiculed me and asked why they should listen to my warnings, since God has taken our land and allowed our enemies to conquer us and take us captive. But soon thereafter, God showed me another vision and I understood why the Hebrews had come to be in such terrible circumstances.

This time, the Lord carried me back to the city of Jerusalem. I found myself in a secret chamber of the temple. There I saw 70 leaders of the city praying to false gods. They bowed to carved images of animals and reptiles; they had defiled the temple by thier idol worship, and they tried to hide their sins from God.

After the vision, I spoke to the exiles living by the Chebar River. "When you return to Jerusalem someday, you must remove all traces of these pagan gods," I told them.

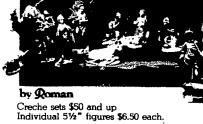"When shall we return to our home?" they

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asked.

"Not soon, but now is the time to decide whether you will turn back to the one true God," I explained.

One day, while praying, I felt myself being carried away again. Suddenly, I saw before me a valley filled with old, dried bones. "Ezekiel, can these bones ever become people again?" the Lord asked.

"Only you know the answer, Lord," I replied.

Then the Lord commanded me. "Tell these bones to become whole again."

I did as the Lord had instructed, and suddenly I heard a great rattling noise. The bones came together and human bodies formed on them. Then a great wind came and these bodies stood up, forming a great crowd of people in the valley where the lifeless bones had been.

When the scene had vanished, I asked the Lord what it had meant. "The old bones represent my people of Israel," He explained. "Because of their sins, they were conquered by their enemies and taken away to a foreign land. Someday I will gather my people again, and they will return home. I will send a Messiah to serve as their King. He will be their shepherd to guide them, and I will make a covenant of peace with all who follow Him. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Throughout my life, I continued to have these visions and to give God's messages to the Hebrews. Many believed and turned back to the Lord. My messages are recorded in the Old Testament, and they are still true today, for God is the same today, yesterday and always.

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The Hebrews remained captives to the Babylonians for 70 years. It is not known if Ezekiel ever returned to Jerusalem, but God's greatest promise came true nearly 600 years later with the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Scripture reference: Ezekiel 1-3, 8, 33 and 37.