

Thirty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time Cycle A

First Reading [Wis 6:12–16](#)*Response [Ps 63:2b](#)*Psalm [Ps 63:2–8](#)*Second Reading [1 Th 4:13–18](#)* Gospel [Mt 25:1–13](#)

“Live every day as though it may be your last.” These are words that I chose to write on my helmet as I sat there next to my foxhole in Vietnam. I was only nineteen at the time, as were most of the Marines in Lima Company, Third Battalion, Third Marine Corps Division. Our company commander just told us to expect a 50% casualty rate during this three-month operation. None of us doubted his words as we carried the broken bodies of our brothers to the medevac choppers day after day. We knew the end time was near for us, and it was time to get our house in order.

On a typical day, we filled in our fox holes in the morning, patrolled all day long, dug a new one in the evening and stood a watch of the night. If we were lucky, we were not ambushed along the way. The saying is true, there are no atheists in foxholes. We were far from home, and we were acutely aware that Viet Nam was a very lonely place in which to die. We believed that there is a God, but he seemed so far away. The words of Wisdom we read here today struck me as true in this context.

“Resplendent and unfading is wisdom,
and she is readily perceived by ones who love her,
and found by those who seek her.
She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of their desire;
For taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence,
and whoever for her sake keeps vigil shall quickly be free from care;
because she makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her,
and graciously appears to them in the ways, and meets them with all solicitude.”

Bishop Robert Barron had an interesting reflection about wisdom and prudence in one of his daily reflections.

“Wisdom, unlike prudence, is a sense of the big picture. It is the view from the hilltop. Most of us look at our lives from the standpoint of our own self-interest. But wisdom is the capacity to survey reality from the vantage point of God. Without wisdom, even the most prudent judgment will be erroneous, short-sighted, inadequate. The combination, therefore, of prudence and wisdom is especially powerful. Someone who is both wise

and prudent will have both a sense of the bigger picture and a feel for the particular situation.”

It is hard for any soldier who faces down mortal danger day after day to see the big picture. Everything is personal and urgent. Hope in God—yes— but seeing God’s providence in our lives—that is a stretch.

It seems that wisdom and prudence were both lacking in many of the decisions that our government was making concerning Viet Nam. The Ken Burns and Lynn Novik ten-part series Vietnam illustrated the historical background. But that was not information that we had, nor could even process, as we were just trying to survive to see the sun rise one more day.

I witnessed many acts of heroism during the ten months that I was in Viet Nam; many times, when one of us totally disregarded his own safety to protect or rescue his brother in arms. One of those times was shortly after I joined the company. My squad leader, Lance Corporal Garcia, pushed me into the foxhole and shielded me with his body to protect me from incoming artillery. He saved me from injury, but he was wounded with shrapnel in his legs. There was no medal for bravery—he was simply doing what any of us would do for our brother. Ordinary everyday heroism—the kind that makes a bond between veterans so strong that it will last forever. The medic bandaged his legs, gave him some morphine and medivacked him the next day. That is the last time I saw Lance Corporal Garcia.

The words of today’s psalm also have meaning for me.

“O God, you are my God whom I seek;
for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts
like the earth, parched, lifeless and without water.

I will remember you upon my couch,
and through the night-watches I will meditate on you:
You are my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy.”

Joy in the midst of war? Now, that is a paradox if I ever heard one! And yet, there were times of joy. I remember standing watch one night, the third watch of the night, when it was so dark that I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face—and yet I could see the ground all around me as though it was a sea of glowing red from the phosphorus in the twigs that

carpeted the earth for as far as the eye could see. I can remember that I felt a great peace come over me, as I pondered the presence of God in that heavenly scene—with tears of joy. That night God stood watch with me—in that God forsaken place.

The words of 1 Thessalonians here today give me consolation that my fallen brothers, “who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met”, will live again. I know that is just as true for the enemy soldiers. Wouldn't it be great if we all meet again—this time with peace in our hearts?

“For the Lord himself, with a word of command,
with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God,
will come down from heaven,
and the dead in Christ will rise first.
Then we who are alive, who are left,
will be caught up together with them in the clouds
to meet the Lord in the air.
Thus, we shall always be with the Lord.
Therefore, console one another with these words.”

Finally, the words of the Gospel give us all fair warning that we are not made for this world, but our true home is in heaven, so we must keep our light burning brightly as we wait for Jesus, the bridegroom.

“Afterwards the other virgins came and said,
'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!'
But he said in reply,
'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.'
Therefore, stay awake,
for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

You might ask the question, “would I join the Marine Corps again, knowing what I know now?” Probably not, but then again, I would miss out on some of the blessings that God has given me along the way. God can always turn personal tragedy into blessing, if we trust in him. If you live every day as though it is your last, seeking the wisdom of God, confident in the promises of Jesus, rest assured that he will come and sit with you in one of your dark watches of the night.

Remember that this weekend, as we celebrate Veterans Day. A day set aside to honor all the men and women who put their lives on the line to make the world safe for democracy—at least that is what we thought we signed up for—the truth was harder to come by. No one goes to war and returns the same. Many of us came back wounded in body, mind and spirit. Some lost an arm or a leg, but all of us lost the innocence that we had when we raised our right hand and swore the oath to “support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic”.

When you come upon a veteran, do your best to understand the life altering experiences we passed through and the sacrifices that we made on behalf of our country. We seriously do not care if you stand, sit, or kneel for the National Anthem. If the circumstance presents itself, just give a veteran a kind word of thanks. That will be patriotic enough.

Saint Cecilia joined Military Outreach USA several years ago to become a “Military Caring Church”. Let one of us know if you see a veteran who would benefit from being part of this listening, caring group of veterans. They don’t need to be Catholic or even Christian. Some of us will be serving coffee and doughnuts after both Masses this Sunday. Thank them for their service, but also pray for us, as many veterans still carry both the visible and invisible wounds of war.

As for today, ask how your life could be different if you begin to “Live every day as though it may be your last” seeking the wisdom of God and believing in the promises of Jesus. Keep your lamp burning brightly so that others may find the way. If your lamp is running low, go to Jesus in prayer, and he will provide all the oil you will ever need.

Deacon Alan Christy

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