

Sermon Advent 1 Year B 2023

I have said previously from this pulpit that every word in the gospels we seek to take seriously. If something is said once, it is enough to take to heart. If it is said twice, then it must be really important. And if it is said three times, then we must really sit up and take notice of it! In just the four verses of the gospel text placed before us today, Our Lord says, *watch* In other translations *stay awake*. This is not new to us. If you have been paying attention, it resonates with what we have been hearing at mass for the past several weeks. What have heard today comes from the gospel of Mark. And for the majority of next year, we will journey very closely with that gospel. But you will remember that this past year we have heard most of Matthew's gospel. And over the last few weeks from Matthew, the same idea has been conveyed to us. *Keep watch*.

This theme, this idea of *wakefulness and watchfulness*, occurs elsewhere. It echoes throughout the gospels, but in other places in the New Testament as well. St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. "Now it is high time to *awake* out of sleep ... The night is far spent, the day is at hand." (Rom. 13:11-12.) And from the First Letter to the Corinthians, "*Watch ye*, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." (1 Cor. 16:13). A couple of weeks ago we heard in the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, 'Let us not sleep as do others, but let us *watch* and be sober." (1 Thess. 5:6). And St. Peter too in his first letter, "The end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober, and *watch* unto prayer." (1 Pet 4:7).

We might say, then, that the idea of watchfulness and wakefulness was of particular concern for the infant church. It was at the forefront of their thinking. And what exactly are we meant to watch out for? Well, in short, the return of Christ, his Second Advent, his Second Appearing, his coming again in glory. Now, this is a central article of faith. It is expressed succinctly in the Creed we have just recited. Central, in part, because of the resounding assent it is given by the New Testament authors. And it means we cannot simply ignore it, dismiss it, or explain it away, as many have attempted to. And so, because this great moment lies before us, we are to watch for it. To look out for it.

The great St John Henry Newman in his collection, 'Parochial and Plain Sermons' has this to say in this issue of watchfulness:

Our Saviour gave this warning when He was leaving this world,—leaving it, that is, as far as His visible presence is concerned. He looked forward to the many hundred years which were to pass before He came again. He knew His own purpose and His Father's purpose gradually to leave the world to itself, gradually to withdraw from it the tokens of His gracious presence. He contemplated, as contemplating all things, the neglect of Him which would spread even among his professed followers; the daring disobedience, and the loud words, which would be ventured against Him and His Father by many whom He had regenerated: and the coldness, cowardice, and tolerance of error which would be displayed by others, who did not go so far as to speak or to act against Him. He foresaw the state of the world and the Church, as we see it this day, when His prolonged absence has made it practically thought, that He never will come back in visible presence: and in the text, He mercifully whispers into our ears, not to trust in what we see, not to share in that general unbelief, not to be carried away by the world, but to "take heed, watch, pray," and look out for His coming.

...He mercifully whispers into our ears, not to trust in what we see... Newman's insight here is that, as always, Our Lord's commands are for our good. For the person of faith, watchfulness is simple obedience to a command of Our Lord. If he asks us to do something, then we really ought to do it! He exhorts us to a certain action – in this case, a certain inward, spiritual disposition – and we trust this in our best interest! Part of the good that this inward, spiritual disposition of watchfulness instills in us is that it takes us *past* the here and now. Our sights are not just directed to a much wider horizon. We are in fact directed *past* the horizon. And what is beyond this horizon Christian faith tells us is trustworthy and true.

Now, atheistic scientism of course will say the exact opposite. It says that the only thing that can be trusted is what we can see. The only things we can be sure of are what we measure, and what is physical, tangible, and observable. This worldview is so incredibly pervasive, and it pushes hard against the church. All too often the church buys into these ideas and responds in the same terms. It discourages us from looking past the wide horizon, and urges us to look only to the here and now. It leaves us with a religion of immanence, of social justice, and activism. It leaves us with a religion devoid of the supernatural and miraculous. It will dismiss the promise of Christ coming in glory as mere speculation and fantasy.

But the sincere Christian knows how tedious and silly these assertions are. The sincere Christian knows that the material and the physical, the here and now *are not* all that matters. And the Christian who allows themselves to be swamped by materialist understandings of the world will hollow out their faith. Newman's insight that Christ, *mercifully whispers into our ears, not to trust in what we see...* is *not* to argue against a rational, observable universe. It is to say it is not enough. It is to say that there is something more. And that 'something more' has ultimate, eternal consequence. And because it has ultimate consequence it is to shape the lives of believers here and now.

In the same sermon on watchfulness Newman says, *We are not simply to believe, but to watch; not simply to love, but to watch; not simply to obey, but to watch... Most of us have a general idea what is meant by believing, fearing, loving, and obeying; but perhaps we do not contemplate or apprehend what is meant by watching.* Perhaps because it is an important idea in the New Testament, and because it is such a clear, firm and repeated directive from Our Lord, and perhaps because it is so roundly and dutifully ignored, that Newman also suggests that watchfulness is the mark of true Christian character. That is to say, that the true and consistent Christian, and the inconsistent Christian, will be revealed on this one point: the attitude of watchfulness, borne of faith in Christ's coming again.

In many ways, it is easy to be imbued with a general, religious sentiment. And in many ways, it is easy to look *back* to Christ. We can read the record of his life in the New Testament. We can hear of those who knew him. We can read back into the Old Testament all the things that pointed to his first coming. But in looking back many will be happy to leave him there, as some sort of historical figure, even if an impressive, inspirational and revolutionary figure. And many will approach this season of Advent as if his first coming were all that mattered. And will be anxious to hear again the stories of angels and shepherds and mangers. But looking back, to leave him there.

But the mark and measure of true Christian faith is if we can also see Christ in our future. And if we see him in our future, it will determine our life here and now. Because looking ahead, we can live in hope. Looking ahead, we accept that we are indeed just pilgrims and strangers. Looking ahead we can be detached from the here and now. Or at least the here and now does not have ultimate sway over us. Looking ahead, the suffering of this present time can be borne with grace. And looking ahead, we will welcome Christ at his second coming as much as we welcome Christ at his first. Amen.