

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)
Sunday 14th November 2021

The Sundays of Ordinary Time are drawing to a close. In two weeks time Advent begins, the season that starts the new year and leads us to Christmas. As the changing of the year approaches the Sunday readings turn apocalyptic and disturbing, as if the dying year is having one last try to grab our attention. They talk of great distress, of sun and moon darkened, and a great prince appearing. As the year ends we think for a while about the end of everything, and as we make that connection in our minds the alleluia verse rings out once again a warning that comes back time and again in the scriptures as a refrain: 'Stay awake and stand ready, because you do not know the hour when the Son of Man is coming'.

Stay awake, keep alert, keep watching. If you are alert you will see the fig tree start to green, and you will know that the summer is on the way. If you are not awake to the world around you, alert to the signs, you will miss the change in the fig tree, and the summer will creep up on you.

But what does it mean to be watchful? What does it mean to be awake and ready? What, in fact, are we supposed to be watching for? What might the life of a watchful person look like?

Imagine you are walking in the countryside, and you sit down for a while to eat a sandwich and have a rest. It is a warm day, and you close your eyes for a few moments, and drift off to sleep. While you are asleep the countryside starts to unfold this interloper. A column of ants sets about the cake that you have put beside you on the tree stump; some cows munch their way along the field, and have a thorough exploration of your sandwiches, and knock over the bottle of water you have brought; the skies begin to darken, the sun is hidden and the grey clouds turn to black, so that you are woken by a sudden cloudburst, trying to grab what's left of your lunch and run for the nearest cover. As long as you were awake you were, to some extent, in control of your place in the world around you. As soon as you fell asleep that control was lost, and the world around you took over. You had no influence on it, and you could not now see the challenges and dangers that it threw up. The ants, the cows, the black clouds all rumbled along without you noticing. You have stopped being a swimmer in the stream, as it were, and become a piece of driftwood tossed about as the water pleases.

The watchfulness that the Gospel asks of us is about making sure that we remain swimmers navigating our own path, not driftwood that is tossed about by forces outside us. The person who is dozing lets themselves be overwhelmed by the flow of events around them; they do not stop to look at them from a distance to evaluate them, to ask what they mean, to ask if they are being lead down a blind alley or slipping into habits which might be common in those around them but which are, all the same, destructive and inhuman. The

person who is dozing does not notice the sort of person that they are becoming, the habits they are taking on and the principles that they have let slip. They allow themselves and their choices to be governed by what they see around them here and now, by the practices and priorities of the culture they are in.

The person who is watchful and awake, is alert to the world around them, to both the opportunities and the dangers that it presents. No black clouds are going to creep up on them, but at the same time they will see the beautiful butterfly and hear the skylark which the sleeper missed. They are able to get a bit of distance from which to look at the world in which they live. Where the sleeper just accepts the culture around them as 'just the way things are' the watchful person declines to accept it as inevitable and uncontrollable, and judges it against a deeper and more profound vision of reality. The sleeper is on a kind of treadmill, living much the same kind of life as everyone around them; the watchful person hops off the treadmill and asks what it is really for, asks if it is actually a truly human life to be living. The sleeper is caught up in all the priorities that the world throws at him; the watchful person asks: 'in the light of eternity, does this matter? Is it wise?' The sleeper is concerned with fitting into the world around them, the watchful person is prepared to surrender that, in order to fit into Heaven. The watchful person asks, when my life is played back before me in the face of my Saviour, will this activity, idea, behaviour look like something important? Or will it turn out that I was distracted into wasting my time and my energy on something shockingly trivial. The person who is sleeping is caught up in all the demands of the physical world and has no time for the spiritual meaning of things; the person who is watchful never lets themselves settle for 'what you see is what you get'. They know that physical reality is always charged with spiritual significance, and so they are able to attribute to anything its real, full value, rather than merely judging it by its physical attributes. To the sleeper an old chair is just an old chair; to the wakeful person it is, perhaps, a chair my father sat on as a child, a chair that has a story to tell and that links me to a deeper story. To the sleeper a wedding ring is just a piece of jewellery, to the wakeful person it is a sacramental, a physical object that tells of love given and received, of hope, and fidelity, and intimacy and completeness. The sleeper sees nothing but the physical, material world and sees nothing of the spiritual one; the wakeful person knows that one day the only thing that will remain will be the spiritual realities, and that the material world will pass away.

Stay awake and stand ready. Let us not be strangers to the spiritual realities that lie below the surface; let us not be strangers to the true significance of things, seen in the light of eternity. Let us not doze through our lives, but instead let us be present to reality on all its levels, awake to all its beautiful complexity.