

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The First Sunday of Advent (Year A)
27th November 2022

'The time has come; you must wake up NOW'. Writing to the Romans St Paul is adamant that this cannot be put off for a moment longer. He wants to bring the Roman Christians to that extraordinary moment of waking, of leaving sleep behind and becoming awake. It is such a fleeting moment, in next to no time we are in familiar territory, recognising the room we are in, the bed, the light through the window, thinking about the day ahead. But before that there is a very brief moment, a moment that cannot be stalled or frozen, a moment which must, by its nature, pass quickly. It is the moment when, just for an instant, we are confused and disorientated. Perhaps we are waking from a dream, devastated to find we are not, in reality. lifting the World Cup above our head – or delighted that we are not in fact being pursued by a pack of wolves, or whatever. Or perhaps we are conscious of no dream but just, very briefly, not sure where we are. Either way, there is a second, or less than a second, where we just don't know what our context is, where we are or what we are doing. St Paul wants the Romans to get their minds into that place, and hold it there.

He wants them in that place because, the moment that we are awake and conscious of where we are and what we are doing, we instantly slot into 'more of the same'. We do the same things, say the same things, focus on the same things, as usual. We are back to being our habitual selves, with all the priorities and behaviours that are part of our regular daily routine. But, for as long as we are disorientated and displaced, there is a real chance of something different. As long as we are drowsily asking 'Where am I?' there is the chance that we might also ask 'Where ought I to be?' As long as we are asking 'What am I doing today?' there is a chance we might also ask 'What ought I to do today, what does deep reality say should be my priority?' As long as we are unsure about our context, there is the chance that we might reinvent ourselves and become something more like we were meant to be. As long as there is a blank canvas, there is the chance that we might do something extraordinary with the day. But then reality kicks in, routine takes over, and we find we are not really in control of how the day plays out.

So, when St Paul says it is time to wake up, and when the Lord says in the Gospel that we should stay awake, they are talking about something deeper than just not being asleep. You can be not asleep, but also be dulled and unthinking, living by just reacting to what is going on around you. They want a much deeper sort of wakefulness than that. They want a sort of 'just awakened-ness', a sense that on this day everything is new and everything is possible. They want us to see each day, each moment, as full of possibility, charged with opportunity. Perhaps this is the day to do something we have been putting off for a long time. Perhaps the train trip to work today is not just a time to flip through social media, but a chance to watch for the world around me, and to pray for the people around me. Perhaps this is the day when I need to wake up to some aspects of my life which I know are not satisfactory, but which I have been trying to ignore. Perhaps this is the day to bury some old grudge, or to say something that requires us to swallow our pride. Perhaps this is not just the day for more of the same, but a time full of opportunity to do new things, even if they are only very small.

The awakened-ness of Advent gives us a few short weeks in which to compare 'what my life is really like' with 'what I would like to think my life is like' and 'what I like other people to think my life is like' and even 'what I would like God to think my life is like'. The person who is awake and watchful sees their life as God sees it, and that can be both beautiful and challenging. But amongst the beauty and the challenges of that reality, it does mean that we also see the opportunities, the opportunities for making Christ present in the world which God can see, but perhaps we easily miss.

So in this Advent, which is only a very brief period of time, lets use that idea of awakened-ness to help us see ourselves, our lives, our situations as they really are. What if God actually wants us to do things a bit differently? What if that very familiar routine that we slip into so easily is actually standing in the way, and we need to be open to something different instead? What if Mary had ignored the angel, engrossed in her daily routine? Or Joseph had not taken the chance to marry her because he was too busy with fulfilling carpentry orders? Or if the shepherds had been worried about not getting a full night's sleep, knowing they had a busy day ahead, so had passed on the chance to hurry to Bethlehem? What if we are allowing our lives to be governed by routine and necessity, when if only we were more awake we might have the chance at something richer? What can I do to make myself more truly awake?