

First Sunday of Advent 29 November 2020

Gospel

Mark 13.33 – end

Jesus said to them, “Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.

Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

The night-vision the Gospel will give us



One of the real failures of our times – ironically, since we’re meant to be living in an age of really effective communication – has been the ‘social messaging’ in connection with the pandemic. The present tag-line is ‘Hands, Face, Space’. But you’ll remember one of the *least* effective: ‘Stay alert. Control the virus. Save lives.’ All very confusing. Well, no one can accuse Jesus of being unclear in today’s Gospel. ‘Stay awake!’ he declares three times in quick succession (vv. 33, 35, 37). It is the key to all spiritual life.

Today, Advent Sunday, the Church starts a new year, and with it we move from reading through the gospel of Matthew to the gospel of Mark. However, we won’t start chapter one verse one till *next week*. Today, we get the banner headline – not just for the year of Mark, but one for a whole life-time of Christian discipleship.

‘We do not need anything’, says one of the earliest desert monks, ‘except a *vigilant spirit*’ (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans Benedicta Ward SLG, p.156). And that’s what Jesus is saying in the Gospel passage too. One version of the Bible puts it even more simply: ‘Watch!’ The first two times we hear it Jesus is speaking only to a small group; but the last time Jesus says to them, ‘What I’m saying to you, I say to everyone!’

The gospel passage relates a private conversation Jesus is having with four key disciples: Peter, James, John and Andrew (*Mark* 13.3). They're sitting on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, perhaps just above Gethsemane, looking across the Kidron valley toward the Jerusalem Temple where Jesus has been teaching earlier in the day. His words are urgent. To underline them, he even throws in a one-verse parable (v. 34), reminding them of what he's so often said before: 'It's like a householder who has to go travelling, and leaves servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper, 'Stay awake!' Don't go to sleep on the job! The master will return. No one knows when. Therefore, in order not to be caught out and found asleep when he comes, Stay awake! Or he'll surprise you.

The scene takes place after Palm Sunday, early in Holy Week, and Jesus's words clearly allude

- to Jesus himself, the householder, who will soon be leaving them to go on the lonely journey to the cross and death;
- to the events later that same week by which he will go away from them;
- to the needs of the disciples once they are left behind;
- and to the moment of the Lord's return.

They're all captured in that single-verse. In it we have an image of the Church, living in human history as a watchman, a sentinel, a lookout. Why? Well for the same reason Jesus would say just before his Ascension (*Acts* 1.7): 'As for the day or hour of that return, *no one* knows: not the angels – not even the Son of God himself! – only the Father' (v. 32). And it is *that simple fact of not knowing that requires Jesus's followers to stay awake*, so that, when he does come – like the famous thief in the night – we are not asleep and unprepared like those who are *not watching*. The times Jesus gives in v. 35 are the four periods into which the Romans divided the night: but notice, none of them is in the daytime.

Jesus's command to us is nothing to do with not going to bed. It's about the present world being comparable to the night. Whenever Jesus comes again it will be in a time of darkness, a darkness that Christians have to live through at all times. A time when you have to resist falling asleep, resist heaviness of soul, resist relaxing and being complacent. And a time when the job of Christians to be *light in the darkness* is needed more than ever. The night in Scripture is a symbol of dark times, of historical darkness, communal, civil and even ecclesiastical darkness; but it's also personal and interior darkness. St Paul says of all Christians, 'You are all sons of light, sons of the day; not of the night or of the darkness' (*1 Thess* 5.5). And thus, in order for Christians to live proper Christian lives in the night-time of this world's darkness, will mean having to sharpen our spiritual gaze, to fight against laziness, to keep watch, and to look for signs of the Lord's presence.

3

I said at the beginning that today's gospel acts as a kind of headline across the *whole* of the Christian life. That's because this spirit of watchfulness is the overall environment in which every Christian must live their life, and grow in faith. Watching for the Lord, and staying alert in an alien and dark environment, unifies our faith and life. Another early church teacher, this time not only a monk but also a bishop, St Basil of Caesarea, said, 'What does it mean to be a Christian? It means keeping watch, every hour of every day, ready to do what we know pleases God, and knowing that the Lord will come at the hour we do not expect.'

Jesus teaches us, that his disciples – that is, all of us who believe his words and try to shape their lives in relation to him – need to develop what we might call 'night-vision' – not simply hanging around in the dark for the Lord's return. But watching, staying vigilant in the darkness of this

world. What boosts our weak night-time vision into something many times more powerful is taking the teaching of the Gospel into our own lives, our ways of thinking and behaving, really soaking up what we hear Jesus *say*, and what we see him *do*, how he *teaches* – and even how he himself *learns* – in obedience to God and in charity towards other human beings. It involves real progress towards the truth – the truth about the darkness of the world, which is not the Christian’s natural environment; the truth about ourselves, which is not always very encouraging; and above all truth about God, which is *always* encouraging. I want to close with a brief word on each one.

1 Truth about the world

First, Christians have to live in the here and now, able to understand our own moment in history from the point of view of the Gospel, living neither with hazy nostalgia about the past, nor with equally hazy wishful-thinking about the future. Instead we need to be alert to the present, to the people and circumstances of the age which we live, and to become prophets able to address the sins and compromises and blind-spots of our age, and also able to look after people with compassion. All this requires us to listen deeply to the Word of God; attentive to its demands and ready to absorb its wisdom and direction, and ready to address the darkness of the world with intelligence and compassion.

2 Truth about ourselves

The second dimension is to do with vigilance about *ourselves*. If we look a little bit sideways to the parallel passage in St Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says that watching for the Lord is always connected with the way we live our lives: with ordinary things like food, drink, sleep, sexuality, and relationships with others. ‘Watch yourselves’, he says, ‘lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation, and drunkenness, and the cares of this life, so that that day will come upon you suddenly like a trap.’ (*Luke 21.34*). ‘Look to yourselves’ says St John (*2 John 8*), ‘Take heed to yourself’, says St Paul (*1 Tim 4:16*). Watchfulness means putting *ourselves* before the Word of God: the word that looks back at us, sees through us, scrutinizes us, lays us bare and by allowing us to see the truth of ourselves, leads us on a path of conversion, strengthening us to be able to do God’s will. Watchfulness over oneself is trying to live in the presence of God and in remembrance of his Word, so that our behaviour and words are more conformed to the Gospel. There is nothing more demanding than knowing yourself and deliberately opening your lives so that the will of God can be done in us.

3 Truth about God

And lastly, part of our self-examination during Advent is vigilance about the way we treat God, and God’s will for us. We should look into ourselves and ask, ‘Can I get myself to the point where I can look at God and say, There is Truth, there’s Beauty and Light and Love and Mercy, and even if it’s painful for me, weak and a bit stupid as I am, to face up to him; yet I’d rather be there with Truth, with Beauty and Light and Love and Mercy, however much it costs, than be locked up with myself?’ If we go down, with the night-vision that the Gospel will give us, deep into the recesses of our own heart and sin, into the darkness and the enigma that is within us, we will also find that, as Jesus reminds us, ‘The Kingdom of God is within you.’ (*Luke 17.21*)

Prayer

O God, our judge and saviour, set before us the vision of your purity and let us see our sins in the light of your holiness. Pierce our self-contentment with the shafts of your burning love; and let love consume in us all that hinders us from perfect service of your cause; for as your holiness is our judgement, so are your wounds our salvation. Amen.

Archbishop William Temple (d 1944)