

First Sunday of Advent 2014

Introduction - Three Messages

The Scriptures for the First Sunday of Advent, this season of expectation for the Lord's coming, at Christmas and at the end of time, contain three messages: First, don't be drowsy; Second, don't be vigilant in the wrong way; Third, be vigilant in the right way...and with your kind permission, I'll get right to it!

Don't Be Drowsy

How easy it is to be drowsy. At the end of a long day, when we get home from work, maybe all we can do is fall asleep on the couch in front of the TV. When that happens we miss so much. We miss communicating with our families, talking over the day, and encouraging one another in preparing for the next day's challenges. We miss the chance to read something that will enrich our minds and hearts and most of all we forfeit the opportunity to pray, to offer our day and our lives to the Lord. How much we are like the apostles who could not stay awake even an hour as the Lord experienced the agony of our sins in the Garden of Olives.

The drowsiness we feel at the end of a long day may be symptomatic of another form of drowsiness, spiritual drowsiness. This is when both body and soul are asleep...oblivious to the presence of the Lord. Spiritual drowsiness is like putting our souls on airplane mode. We temporarily turn off our ability to receive signals from the Lord. He sends sign after sign that he loves us and wants to free us from our sins, but we just go about business as usual.

Spiritual drowsiness gets worse when we become mired in serious sin. Sin is like a drug that may make us feel pretty good for a time, but it dulls our spiritual senses...it makes us less and less aware of God's goodness and less and less open to the needs of those around us. Getting really deep into sin is like taking the battery or the Sim card out of our phones. God sends his signals, but if we're lulled into spiritual slumber by our sins, we won't hear his call nor will we answer it; Advent is a spiritual wake-up call.

Don't Be Vigilant the Wrong Way

Point two spells out the first point a little more, and it's this: Jesus tells us to be

watchful, to be vigilant but not in the wrong way. How can we be vigilant in the wrong way?

Well, you might have seen wrong-headed vigilance first hand these last few days. I'm thinking of Black Friday shoppers who were all full of anxiety, with every fiber of their being on high-alert, ready to rush into Best Buy or Walmart, to get the lowest possible price on that big screen TV they just can't live without. You may have seen news reports of shoppers who actually became violent with each other over merchandise that soon will be obsolete, broken, or in a yard sale.

But there are other ways not to be vigilant, such as being on the outlook to get the upper hand on a rival or to take revenge on an enemy. Such people are watchful, but not in the way the Lord intended. Theirs is a self-centered, grasping watchfulness at complete odds with the Gospel.

The Vigilance of Love

So what kind of vigilance does the Lord want us to practice? What does he mean when he says, "Be watchful! Be alert!" I think he is calling us to a vigilance of love. It is akin to the way we wait for children to get home from school or a spouse to return home from work or from a business trip. While we are looking forward to their return, we are also busy preparing for them, making sure that all will be in order when they walk through the front door.

Advent is a season of expectation. It's when the Church puts us on high alert to the coming of the Lord. Indeed, every Sunday, in the Creed, we look forward to that day when "[Christ] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." And at every Mass we speak of waiting for the Lord with "joyful hope". But in the meantime, the Lord wants to walk through the front door of our hearts. He loves us. He gave his life to save us. He wants to live at our side every day to enlighten, strengthen, and free us. (cf. EG, no. 164) When Jesus knocks at the door of our hearts, he wants to find us awake and prepared. He wants to find in our souls the warm welcome of love; he wants to find in us the good order brought about by virtuous living, habitually keeping the Commandments in the spirit of the Beatitudes. The Lord wants to find in us plenty of room for Himself but also for those in need, especially the poor and the vulnerable. If we are spiritually drowsy or if we

are distracted by self-centered pursuits, we may not even hear Him knocking at the door of our hearts. We won't be ready for Him, now or later, when He comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

Conclusion

So on this first Sunday of Advent, be it resolved that we will practice the vigilance of love, summed up so beautifully by the prayer of Fr. Jacques Jean Olier, the priest who founded the Sulpician Fathers who oversee St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, it goes like this:

O Jesus, living in Mary, Come and live in your servants, In the spirit of your holiness, In the fullness of your might, In the truth of your virtues, In the perfection of your ways, In the communion of your mysteries. Come and subdue every hostile power, in your Spirit, for the glory of the Father. Amen.