1st Sunday in Advent 2023

In 1623, seven years after his death, the thirty-six plays written by William Shakespeare, were published in a single volume, now referred to as the “First Folio”. It is arguably the greatest work in English literature, and for that reason the BBC celebrated this four hundredth anniversary by dedicating a season to Shakespeare’s works. As part of the season, and under the collective title of “The Hollow Crown”, a number of the historical plays have been re-broadcast, the first in the series being “Richard the Second”. Shakespeare portrays King Richard as self-absorbed and self-deluded, listening only to the voices of his flatters, while his moral authority as king drains away. He is deposed by his nobles, imprisoned, and eventually murdered. In prison, Richard, morosely contemplating his situation, notes too late, “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me” *(Act V, 5, line 49).*

When the King says, “I wasted time”, it is in the sense of wasting opportunities. He was certainly not accusing himself of idleness; he wasn't a waster in that sense, but he did waste those opportunities that could have made him a wise and good monarch. Jesus, in today’s Gospel passage, uses the word “time” in the same sense; *“you never know when the time will come.”* - grace filled opportunities can be easily missed. Jesus warns us that if we are not “awake” these moments can pass us by, unnoticed – and they do come every day!

The season of Advent intentionally comes to us as a great wake-up call. Another literary giant, the American author, J.D. Salinger, said that the most important word in the Bible is *“Watch!”*. Watch in the sense of watch out! Advent cries out *“Watch! Be alert! B*e *vigilant!”* Jesus himself cries out to us, *“Be on your guard, stay awake, because you will never know when the time will come.”*

Having given his warning, Jesus tells a short parable*; “It is like a man travelling abroad: he has gone from home, and left his servants in charge, each with his own task”.* The underlying suggestion is that, when the master is away, the servants may be tempted to become slack and undisciplined in carrying out their allotted tasks. We are reminded that our allotted task is to faithfully live our faith day-in-day-out - the practice is not a matter of mere choice, it is a responsibility!

Perhaps it is worth keeping in mind that, rather extraordinarily, the one thing that can cause us to become slack and undisciplined in the practice of our faith is what might be called “the treadmill of busyness”. We can become so busy with urgent affairs, that we don’t have time for priorities! Advent challenges us to be alert to the real priorities of life - one of which is pointed out to us by Jesus. He says: *“you do not know when the master of the house is coming.....if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep”*, that is, worn out by busyness! Advent, in spite of the so-called “Christmas rush”, challenges us to have a more balanced way of life.

It often seems that it is only when the fragility of life is laid bare by some crisis or trauma that we manage to get our priorities in order. St Augustine advised that we should live each day as if it is our last. That indeed is a summary of today's Gospel passage. In our own minds we can fool ourselves into thinking that we can push the Lord’s return down the road and far into the future – but we are warned, *“we do not know when the master is coming”.*

At the very heart of today’s Gospel Jesus inserts a curious little phrase, *“he has told the doorkeeper to stay awake”.* In ancient times the doorkeeper’s purpose was to be always on the alert for danger, thus ensuring the safety of those in the house. Jesus inserts this reference for two reasons; first to remind us of the importance of gratitude. We give thanks for those who have been doorkeepers in our lives, those who “look out” for us and alert us to real dangers – those such as parents, grandparents, and other family members; our friends and colleagues; members of our parish community. Then, secondly, to prompt us to remember that we in turn are to be doorkeepers for others. Our Christian example, our words of guidance, and our prayers, serve to keep others true to their faith. This is the theme St Paul touches upon in today’s second reading when he declares*, “I thank God that you have been enriched in so many ways, especially in your teachers and preachers: the witness of Christ has indeed been strong among you”.*

*“Lord,*

*because of our distracted lives*

*we too often miss the moments of your grace.*

*It is then that our sins blow us away like withered leaves!*

*Let us not stray from your ways,*

*for you are our Father, and we*

*the work of your hands.”* **Amen**