

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Mark 13:33-37

Beware, keep alert; 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 slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake-for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

REFLECTION 1:

‘STAY AWAKE’

Many people have tried to describe time; few however have understood it. Plato the Greek philosopher said that time is the image of eternity. Emmanuel Kant, the German philosopher said that time has no real existence outside the human mind. Shakespeare wrote that: ‘time hath a wallet on its back, wherein he puts alms for oblivion’ while Einstein describes time as the fourth dimension. Arnold Bennett said that it was; ‘the inexplicable raw material of everything, with it all is possible without it nothing is possible’.

Hours pass like minutes for those who travel on a jet plane, but it can be an eternity for a child who is lost in a crowd. Time drags for the keeper of a lighthouse as the pulse of the pounding waves measures the hours. While another kind of pulse, the human heart, measures time with the speed of lightning as an anxious surgeon fights for a patient’s life.

If time moves slowly for one person and rapidly for another, we could very well say that each has a different measure of time. Actually, we all measure time in the same way; the difference lies in our individual approach or perception of time. The method of measuring time we know developed from nature, the phases of the moon and the seasonal cycles and so the calendar evolved.

From the calendar the subdivisions of time were measured, first by the sundial, the hourglass and finally the mechanical or today, the digital watch or clock. A clock however only measures the passage of time; it cannot explain why one person has time to spare, while another person never has enough. The truth about time lies in our attitude towards time and not in its measurement. It lies in the realisation that the only time is now – tomorrow will be now only when we reach it. Now is the only time that truly matters.

A great saint was once asked if he had his life to live again, how would he live it and his reply, ‘one moment at a time’, because the only way that life can be lived is in the reality of the present. No matter how young or old we are, time is on our side and our greatest asset lies in how we organise that time.

Jesus warns us in today’s Gospel to stay awake and not to go asleep. He means us not to spend our time in useless regrets over the past, its failures and shortcomings. He would warn us against daydreaming about the future – honest and prudent planning, yes, but idle fantasies – no! We are his servants left in charge – each one with our own task to do.

Jesus pictures our life as that of a doorkeeper who is constantly on the watch for the Master returning after travelling abroad. The homecoming of the Master is our appointed time for entry into eternity – in a word, our death.

The beginning of Advent is a good opportunity to plan our right use of time. We simply do not know when the Master of the house is coming, in the evening of life, in middle age or at the dawning of adulthood. Even if he does come unexpectedly, by living each moment as best we can, we will always be awake – well prepared for that final hour, ready to open the door to our Master.

St. Francis de Sales in the middle of a game of chess was asked when he would like God to call him. 'He can call me now', said the Bishop of Geneva, 'I am living from one move to the next'.

REFLECTION 2:

THE QUICK FIX

Greek and Roman playwrights devised a theatrical device known as 'Deus ex machina'. This literally means 'God from the machine'. So, when deus ex machina was called into play, the god or gods would be lowered onto the stage through a pulley or crane to save what seemed to be a hopeless situation. And so the phrase has been extended to refer to any solution of a story that challenges our belief. For instance, in 'War of the Worlds' by H.G. Wells, the Martian invasion is finally halted by earth borne bacteria. In short, deus ex machina is a quick fix in a story and functions like the cavalry charging into the fray in the old Western movie.

Is this the kind of quick fix for which the Israelites were hoping, when through the Prophet Isaiah (First Reading) they cried out to God to 'Tear the heavens and come down'? With their backs against the wall, politically, economically and spiritually, the prophet and his contemporaries sought relief, relying on God's love and mercy. Isn't this also the remedy each one of us desires when we look at our lives and find no other solution save that of a divine intervention?

We see the proliferation of violence on our streets, the rip-off Ireland, the pollution of our environment, the lack of leadership and in our frustration we cry out to God, 'Tear open the heavens and come among us and fix all this mess!' Yet, this joyful season of Advent reminds us that our yearning for quick fixes is unfounded. God has already come among us, has already taken on our flesh and blood. He is engaged in time and space and has chosen to remain with us as bread and wine, word and spirit.

These weeks of Advent call us to an awareness of Emmanuel, God with us, here and now, and this blessing of God's continual presence among us has become available through the birth of Jesus. To be born means to come into existence without being asked and the starting point for all of us was in the hands of others. Jesus also accepted this surrender on our behalf and through his birth he domiciled our history and began the long march of living that will ultimately end in death.

So, we need not look anxiously at the heavens, imploring God to send in the cavalry that will resolve our struggles. In all of us lies that divine spark that began to exist when Jesus was conceived into our humanity. Each Advent we fan that spark into a flame by a renewed alertness to that God in our midst. We are in fact the cavalry, that deus ex machina – we must work together for good and together we can become a power that no evil can defeat.