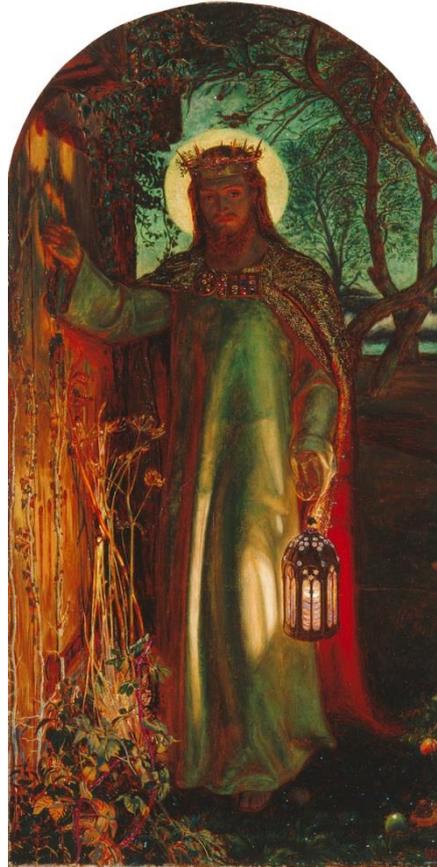


Some words for the First Sunday of Advent (B)

*'Drop down, ye heavens, from above,
and let the skies pour down righteousness.'*¹



Readings:

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1. 3-8

Psalm 79:2-3. 15-16. 18-19. R.v.4

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

It has turned out to be quite a year for the hundreds of millions of us who find it somewhat trying, whenever we have to spend our time simply having to watch and wait for something to happen. As outcomes are assessed, data analysed and trends discerned, decisions are taken that can affect us all. From continents and countries, to regions and cities, the pandemic has seen governments, national health services, financial markets, and a vast array of institutions and organisations, all watching and waiting for news. The early promise of vaccines offers light at the end of the tunnel and millions search daily for the latest reports as we look to the future and hope to see the dawn of a return to 'normality.'

A sign of the 'new normal' we are told is the enormous acceleration in demand for online shopping and home delivery. It was once said of a friend of mine that he would wear a cope to sign a Mass card, however, don't let this fool you. He is also

very techno-savvy and was an early-adopter and adapter to the world of delivery-slots and drop-offs. Alas, I confess that I had always harboured a more romantic vision of such things. I have found it difficult to accept that I can't just go out to the front gate and, for the price of a few pennies, summon some street urchin. In my mind's eye, the youth would take my fountain-penned note and, disappearing amidst a swirl of Sherlockian fog, he would soon return with half-a-pound of bacon and perhaps news of a stolen diamond also. The reality is, of course, far more prosaic and I cannot be the only one juggling my diary with delivery days, slots and schedules, to say nothing of the requirements of return policies and refunds. Yes, there are those retailers that text you or provide real-time displays of the progress of goods to your door but not all of them do by any means. In fact I suspect that, for many, countless hours have been spent these past few months tethered to homes and watching at doors and windows for the advent of a delivery.

*'But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it,'*² says Jesus, clearly not talking about home deliveries; *'neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, no one but the Father.'*³ No, our Lord is in fact addressing the advent of his future Second Coming (*'in the clouds with great power and glory'*⁴), and it is important that we understand this context, as today's gospel passage is immediately preceded by those words of his. Indeed, given that the final admonition to *'Stay awake!'*⁵ is likewise directly followed in St Mark's Gospel by the Passion, then it is clear that our gospel today is critically placed in the life and work of our Lord. The unknown future day and hour of the Day of Judgement, when the Master will return, are thus connected to the sacrificial suffering that Jesus is to imminently undergo. As he will shortly go on to say in Gethsemane, *'The hour is come.'*⁶

Even though he is Son and ranks above the angels it is worth noting that, in his flesh, even Jesus does not possess his Father's knowledge and so the importance therefore of being *'on your guard [and] awake, because you never know when the time will come'*⁷ is underlined. The Greek word *Kairos*, that is translated here as time, is not to be understood as referring to a precise chronological point but rather in that sense when we use the word to speak about an opportunity or decisive moment. In this case Jesus is speaking about the opportunity of an eternal lifetime. It isn't keeping an eye on the clock that matters but what we are doing with our time, our opportunity, which really counts.

This point is further underlined and illustrated by the example of the man who travels abroad. In this short parable the master is clearly our Lord and, literally handing over his authority, he leaves his servants in charge of his affairs. While all the servants have their *'own task'*⁸ to undertake, the doorkeeper, traditionally understood to be St Peter and the Apostles, has the particular charge of keeping watch, so that the master may be properly welcomed upon his return. Other than at full moon, and even then it was scarce, travel at night, especially in the countryside, was extremely rare and dangerous. That the master might return at any time

therefore, is underscored by reference to the four traditional divisions of the Roman night: the evening watch, midnight watch, cockcrow watch and dawn watch. It would be usual therefore for the master only to travel and arrive during the light of day. That no such assumptions should be made though is clear and thus it is vital that the master, '*must not find you asleep,*'⁹ and that, for the fourth and final time in this short passage, we are told: '*Stay awake!*'¹⁰

Many scholars see the four divisions of the night watch echoed by St Mark in his telling of the night of our Lord's Passion, where the Church was to be found sleeping in the garden of Gethsemane. The need for sleep for human health is well understood of course, and no one is suggesting that Christians should suffer from insomnia or the chronic effects of sleep-deprivation. Sleep in the New Testament is often used as analogy to convey self-indulgence and spiritual lethargy¹¹ and it stands in sharp contrast to the state of being awake, which is seen as being alert and alive in faith.¹²

For some people at the moment, the masked delivery worker may be the only other person they might briefly meet and come into distant contact with over the course of a week or more, and their arrival therefore might be even more keenly anticipated than usual. Some home delivery providers only notify you of the dispatch of an item. After that, it is up to you to make the necessary preparations to receive it. You might now have a rough idea of the impending time frame but you still do not know the exact day or hour your parcel will arrive.

Each and every Advent, as we begin again the annual cycle of celebrating the Mysteries of Christ, the Church reminds us of this same struggle to stay observant and concentrated on the return of the Lord. We know that the Spirit and grace of God are at work in our world and that our Lord is with us now in his Word and Sacraments. We affirm he is present among all the baptised and we believe too that we may especially see his face in all who are in any kind of need. Nonetheless, we also hold that we will see him face to face and so the need to prepare and be ready for that moment remains the same for the Christian in any age. As we heard last week, the return of our King will see the neglectful, '*go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life.*'¹³

Last Saturday evening I watched an excellent documentary called *The Night Notre-Dame Burned*. The programme blends the stories of a number of the evening's participants with striking footage of last year's tragic fire and the film shows both the ferocity of the fire and the enormity of the challenge faced by the Paris Fire Brigade. Many of those with a tale to tell are various ranking members of this brigade and, as the story of their fight with fire unfolded, I was struck by how they responded to the crisis. For most of us, a crisis is such because it is something that we have not expected to face or we are simply not prepared for. Although the physical environment of Notre-Dame provided more than enough headaches and difficulties for the fire fighters – to the extent that it threatened their lives – their

training and preparation eventually won through. Watching and waiting usually require the virtues of patience and perseverance but it is the nature of fire brigades and indeed all emergency services, to remain vigilant through practice also.

The Lord has taught and equipped us how to be prepared for his return so that, when the moment comes, we will indeed be ready. A life that seeks to practice virtue, that is trained and refreshed by prayer and the Sacraments, and which ultimately finds outward expression in works of Faith, Hope and Charity, is the basis of Christian preparation for the Second Coming. Best of all, we are not alone in our task, because it is the Lord himself who comes to shepherd us into his abiding presence.

One of the most impressive moments in the documentary I watched came at the end of the programme. Having finally halted the fire and saved the cathedral, the brigade dispersed and returned at the end of the day to their stations across the city. One of the stations happened to be facing an inspection the next morning and, while we might well have understood if the exhausted crews based there had sought to reschedule that examination, they did no such thing. They stayed up and worked at the station throughout the night, doing their job, cleaning and preparing their equipment for the morrow. I am sure that the euphoria and adrenaline of their successful firefight helped them but it was a powerful testimony to the necessary dedication and service that form a daily part of their work. After all, we don't tend to stay awake by doing nothing.

*'Hark! a herald voice is calling: 'Christ is nigh' it seems to say;
'Cast away the dreams of darkness, O ye children of the day!'*

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us*

St Joseph, *pray for us*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

27 November 2020

The picture is of *The Light of the World*, William Holman Hunt (1827–1910)

1. *Rorate coeli*, Advent Responsory, Latin 10th C., English Hymnal, 1906
2. *Mark 13:32*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Mark 13:26*
5. *Mark 13:37*
6. *Mark 14:41*
7. *Mark 13:33*

8. *Mark 13:34*
9. *Mark 13:36*
10. *Mark 13:37*
11. *1 Thessalonians 5:6-8*
12. *Ephesians 5:14*
13. *Matthew 25:46*
14. *Hark! a herald voice is calling*, Latin 5th C., verse 1, trans. E. Casswall (1814-1878)