

HOMILY 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.

Dear Friends,

This month of November is a time of endings, a time when we remember especially the departed, our own departed loved ones, those who gave their lives in war, all the faithful who have gone to their eternal rest. We are in the last few weeks of the Church's year and will hear the message, 'Stay awake, be alert, because you do not know the time or the hour.' How do we maintain a state of alertness for the Lord's coming to us, at the end of things and in our lives here and now?

I used to be asked this question by an elderly woman I saw regularly, someone well into her 90s, who would say most times we met, 'In the nature of things I am not likely to live very much longer: what should I be doing to prepare for my death?' It is a natural question to ask, but one that is hard to answer, partly because the afterlife is something of which we can have no real knowledge: the pictures we make of it are images of the world we know now, we cannot imagine in any other way.

This does not mean, however, that we can say nothing about the afterlife that will not simply be wrong, because if we believe that in it we will meet God face to face and know him directly without any of the restrictions or conditions we cannot avoid here in this world, then it will not be something totally different - our knowing God in the afterlife will be a continuation and intensifying of our knowing God now.

What this suggests to me is that the best preparation we can make is to continue our life of faith and service of God as best we can as long as we are able, focusing on the ways in which we can be in relationship with God - prayer and love. So I said to my elderly friend, 'I think what you should do is carry on your prayer and worship of God and live your life as fully, as deeply as you can.' This is not easy as we get older and find ourselves physically unable to do the things we used to do, but whatever we are able to do we can still give ourselves to it wholeheartedly, knowing that God is always where we are, in the place and time where we find ourselves. God is always making himself available to us, so we never need to be somewhere else or doing something else to be with God, only where we are.

The second reading of this Sunday's Mass, from St. Paul writing to the Thessalonians, puts it like this:

*It is not as if you live in the dark, brothers and sisters,
for that Day to overtake you like a thief.
No, you are all children of light and children of the day:
we do not belong to night or darkness,
so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does,
but stay wide awake and sober.*

Staying awake and sober entails keeping in touch with God in whatever way is open to us, certainly by prayer and worship, but also, importantly, by making the most of our life and the opportunities given to us while we can. This seems to be the message of the Gospel reading on this Sunday, the parable of the talents. The word talent here means a coin of high value, but in English it is also of course a word for the gifts and abilities we have. Do not hide your light under a bushel, as the proverb says, but use your talents, develop them, make the most of them. In the parable the one who makes no effort with his talents, but hides them away, is given short shrift: 'you wicked and lazy servant!' the master says to him. In God's kingdom the more you give of yourself the more you will receive back, nothing less than the fullness of God. So be alert, as you never know the time and the hour! You never know what opportunities will come your way to know God, for example in the people you meet.

In the parish where I live the Benedictines of Ealing are following the way St. Benedict laid down many centuries ago. One of the things he says in his Rule to guide the life of religious communities is that every visitor to the monastery should be received as if it were Christ himself. This is a good precept for all of us, to see Christ in other people, especially the suffering and those in need. In serving them we are serving God, which is what we are called to in the Church - not just to save ourselves, but to be of service to others who need God's love, for if we expect God to love us we must understand that he loves everyone else in the same way and to the same extent. So again be alert: God may be coming to you in the next person you meet!

It was so good this last week to hear the promising news of a vaccine for Coronavirus becoming available quite soon. It gives us hope that there will be an end to our present abnormal state and we will come through it and be able to live our lives in the way we want to and enjoy the things that we have had to do without. We can hope also that we will have learned something of value in this time about what really matters, what is really important, that we can carry with us into the future. And let us thank God for the medical staffs and researchers who have used their talents so generously to help us all.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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