

## Homily for 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent Year B

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting, a prelude to Christmas. But with this morning's Gospel, as with those of the last few Sundays, the Church reminds us that, though the Messiah has come in Jesus born of Mary, we are still a waiting people, an Advent people. The whole chapter, in which today's reading occurs in Mark's Gospel, teaches us that Christ, whose coming we celebrate at Christmas, is to come again; it is this we long and wait for. Today's Gospel likens our time now to a man who has gone off travelling, leaving his servants in charge at home. (Mark 13:34) This, of course, is our situation: Christ has ascended to heaven, leaving us here to carry on. His word to us today is, "Stay awake, because you do not know when the Master of the house is coming ... If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping." (Mark 13:35-36)

Well, we have been waiting for Christ's return for some 2000 years now. We could be forgiven for forgetting that we expect his return. The temptation of our time is that of the dishonest servant in Matthew's Gospel 'who says to himself, "My master is taking his time," and sets about beating his fellow servants and eating and drinking with drunkards.' (Matthew 24:48-49) It may not be that we give ourselves over to living the 'good life', a life of self-indulgence, as such. It may just be that we get caught up in doing what we are doing and forget we have a Master, who has given us a task to do and whose return we expect presently. So what Jesus says to us all now is: "Stay awake!" (Mark 13:37) This was part of his briefing to us, his servants, before he went abroad. A component of our task is to be watchful. As a way of being mindful of this, we monks keep Vigil, getting up each morning before dawn to wait in the dark, watching confidently for the coming sun/Son.

To the doorman he said, "So stay awake." In saying the same to us, our departing Lord has appointed each of us as doorkeepers to keep watch. (Mark 13:34) This Lord, who is coming and for whom we are watching, is the Father's Son. This reminds me of St Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son, in which we are told of a father's son who goes off to a distant country, there to live the 'good life'. After a while he hits rock bottom and so comes to his senses. He then decides to return — though he has nothing, not even his good name — to his father's house.

Then St Luke says to us, "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly." (Luke 15:20) This, I would suggest, is the model our departing Lord has left us as our way of keeping watch for the return of the

son. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” our Lord says to us. (Matthew 5:48) We are to keep watch for, so as to welcome, the repentant sinner, for this one, too, is the Father’s son and whose return we are to await — expectantly! (Luke 19:9) We must never write anyone off.

In the parable, it is the brother who wilfully refuses to welcome the return of the Prodigal Son. He even goes so far as to deny his kinship. (Luke 15:28ff) This is, sadly, how we often react to the penitent, especially when it is we whom he or she has sinned against. When Peter, the first of the Lord’s disciples, said to him, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me, as many as seven times? the Lord replied, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.” (Matthew 18:21-22) In the parable of the Lost Sheep, the Lord reminds us that it is not enough to wait for the sinner to come to us and say, “Sorry”; we need to actively seek out the lost one. As St Paul puts it, “Sisters and brothers, if someone is caught in a transgression, you who are the more spiritual should restore that person in a spirit of humility, watching out for yourselves lest you also be tempted.” (Galatians 6:1) Or as the Lord more bluntly puts it: “If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother.” (Matthew 18:15) As stewards of the Lord’s house we need to be actively busy about our Master’s business, watching over all in his household, especially the erring one, till he comes. (Matthew 24:45-46)

That we have ‘won back our brother’ is cause for great rejoicing, as the parable of the Prodigal son reminds us. In that parable the rejoicing takes the form of a great banquet, a real celebration. So, like our Master, it must be able to be said of us, too: “Why does he eat with sinners?” (Matthew 9:11) That you and I and each one of us sin ‘seventy-seven times’ and so potentially repents seventy-seven times, life in in the Lord’s household begins to take on the look of the Eternal Banquet, the imagery we use for the end of time when our Lord returns. (One wonders at the need for the dishonest servant to be eating and drinking with drunkards! Matthew 24:49) On his return, they will again say of him: “Look he is going to stay at the sinners’ house!” for this is what we are; in our celebrations over the return of sinners this will be obvious to everyone. (Luke 19:7; John 13:35)

It is worth noting that in the parable of the Prodigal son, it is not the repentant sinner who is left out of the celebration, but the brother who would not welcome his return. Refusal to welcome the penitent will see us labelled as dishonest servants on our Master’s return. Then our Master will cut us off and send us to the same fate as the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, as Jesus puts it in Matthew’s Gospel. (Matthew 24:51) We all have found, and probably still will find, ourselves in the position of the prodigal son; we cannot afford to be self-righteous. Such will certainly see us excluded from the heavenly banquet. Rather, like our Prodigal Father,

we must be constantly be on the look out for the slightest hint that our alienated sister or brother wants to come back to us, and then hasten quickly to lovingly embrace. “Stay awake,” says Jesus. And as Jesus said to us last Sunday, “What you did to one of these least brothers of mine, you did to me.” (Matthew 25:40) If we do this, we will always be found ready to welcome our Lord when at last he comes. (Mark 13:34; Matthew 24:46) “So stay awake.”