

## The Second Sunday of Advent



Whatever else he was, Jesus was someone who lived in constant contact with God, someone who was continually open to God's influence. That meant he was someone who was filled with the holiness and love, the passion for truth and justice, which are the heart of God's own character.

Like so many of the holy men and prophets who came before him, and so many of the mystics and saints who came after him, Jesus looked around at his own society and his overwhelming impression was that most people - even the conventionally religious people - had not been genuinely touched by God.

Despite their professions of religious devotion, and despite a widespread belief in all kinds of superstition, many of the people at the time of Jesus' ministry were closed to the real God. Far from eagerly pursuing holiness, love, justice and so on, the reality was that their lives were filled with other purposes and goals, often trivial and self-seeking.

In the face of these obstacles Jesus felt a sense of urgency in proclaiming God to people and in summoning them to place their lives under God's reign, to use his own preferred image. And the sense of urgency Christ felt often came out in the kind of threatening language and menacing images that we find in this parable in St Mark's Gospel.

*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.'*

The assumption behind these images is that every human being without exception is intended to live in communion with God and to become like God. That's the basic vocation that we all share. But the other assumption Jesus makes here is that life is short and the time we have to turn to God is limited. To go through life - and maybe reach the end of our life - without making contact with God is a catastrophe as far as Jesus is concerned.

In this particular parable, with its image of servants being caught asleep on the job, we're not supposed to draw the conclusion that God is some sort of sadistic master who takes pleasure in throwing his subordinates into panic and confusion. The scene is certainly meant to symbolise the end of time, or the end of each person's life and their meeting with God, but the point of the parable isn't to make people *fear* God's approach.

Jesus' real point here is, as it often was: don't waste any more time. God's Kingdom has already arrived, so now is the hour of decision. Don't wait until it's too late to turn to God and embrace his call to holiness.

Well the truth is that, for all Jesus' sense of urgency, the number of people who actually respond to that kind of appeal, both in his time and in ours, is probably quite small. Even among Christians and people who say they believe in God there can be a lack of passion and a half-heartedness about "the call to holiness".

I don't mean that people are necessarily lazy or indifferent about their spiritual life or their relationship with God. The more basic problem seems to be a sort of defeatism or a low level of aspiration morally and spiritually.