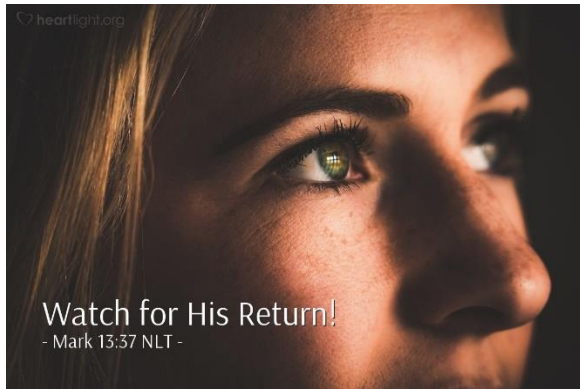


Homily - December 3, 2023 – First Sunday of Advent



I remember being at a talk 30 years ago, given by John Shea, who was invited to speak at St. Paul's University in Ottawa. John Shea is a theologian from Chicago, and the best storyteller I have ever heard. One of the things he said--and for some reason I remembered it 30 years later--was, ***“The key to gospel spirituality is not***

to look at Jesus but to look with Jesus. You’ll learn very little, if anything at all, by looking at Jesus. But you’ll learn a lot by seeing the world through his eyes.” When St. Paul speaks about us “putting on the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:5), I think he’s saying the same thing. And when Native North Americans spoke about walking a mile in another person’s moccasins, again, I think they are making the same point.

Here comes another angle on that same idea from one of the world’s greatest philosophers, Socrates. At a trial, where Socrates was sentenced to death for supposedly “corrupting” the minds of youth, he said, ***“The unexamined life is not worth living.”*** Socrates, like Jesus 500 years later, was inviting people to do some soul-searching, to go deeper, to see life from a deeper level than just getting through this darn Monday to Friday job so I can do my thing on the weekend.

For two years, at one of the rectories I lived at, there was a 6-foot fence dividing my backyard from the neighbour’s. Because the fence was so high, all the conversations I had with this neighbour were like an episode of Tim the Toolman; I could only see his eyeballs and that’s probably all he saw of me. He was a nice guy, but he had no ambition, no goals in life, absolutely no personality. After talking about the weather, the price of gas, and the price of beer, there was really nothing else to chat about; that’s how small his world was. He lived only to get to Friday, so he could drink the weekend away and start back on the conveyer belt on Monday morning. His was definitely an “unexamined life.”

Sometimes I need people like that to wake me up, if for no other reason than the fact that I don't want to end up like them. I can easily become that way when I look at life and just formulate opinions about whether I like something or don't like it. It becomes a flat-earth way of looking at everything. Eventually routines become ruts and the spice of life is long gone. Just as writers complain about having "writer's block", I'm sure every one of us has experienced spiritual dryness. In those moments, it appears God is absent from our struggles and indifferent to what we're going through. Without feeling God's presence, the meaning seems to have drained out of our lives and we appear to be just going through the motions. In those times, I'm still looking *at* Jesus, but I'm not looking *with* Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah looks back and says, "***O Lord, you are our redeemer of old.***" In other words, "You redeemed our ancestors way back when they were slaves in Egypt. You brought them to the Promised Land and made them your people. That was hundreds of years ago. Now, we are exiles once again, not enslaved in Egypt but in Babylon. Break open the heavens, make the mountains quake, come down and save us as you once saved our ancestors. We have given up and are like a bunch of faded leaves waiting to be blown away with the next gust of wind." That's what Isaiah felt. That's what Isaiah saw. God said to him, "There's another way of looking at this. I am not just the God who heard the pleas for your ancestors back then, I also hear your pleas. I am the potter; you are the clay. You are the work of my hands, and these hands have never stopped working."

God was inviting Isaiah to stay awake, and to tell the people to stay awake to what God was doing in their midst. Do we read and hear these Scripture stories as just stories of what God did in the past? Or do we still see the molding hand of God shaping our history here and now? History can be described by two Greek words: *chronos* and *kairos*. From the word "chronos" you hear the word "chronology". Chronos time is sequential time measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, and years. It's one thing after another. The other Greek word, *kairos*, refers to a breakthrough in time. In the world of *kairos* something breaks into your life, into the middle of boring, old chronology and wakes you up; it makes a claim on your

life. Another way to refer to this is to see the difference between history and salvation history. As Christians we believe not only in the undisputable facts of history but, more importantly, we believe in salvation history. We believe God has broken into our world, our history, and continues to do so to this day. Just as the potter has never stopped forming the clay, so God has not stopped breaking into our world in new and creative ways. Our job is to “keep awake.”

A story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, who, when he was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of World War II, was called “the Little Flower” by adoring New Yorkers because he was only five foot two and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. “It’s a bad neighborhood, Your Honor,” the man told the mayor. “She’s got to be punished to teach other people here a lesson.”

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail.” But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it

into his famous sombrero, saying, "Here is the ten-dollar fine, which I now remit; and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

So, the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47. 50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and the New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Whenever we look with Christ, and not just at Christ, salvation history breaks into our world, fences come down between neighbours, and Christ is born anew.

Fr. Phil