

Advent 1C

In the market place of the old German town of Trier, two churches stand adjacent to each other. "Watch and pray" is written beneath the belfry of one and beneath the belfry of the other the verse in completed, "for you know neither the day nor the hour". As the clock chimes out on the hour, the people in the busy street below are being continually reminded of the transitory nature of life and their readiness to meet the Lord when He comes knocking on their door. This message is for all of us.

What does it say in the Gospel today? "Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with cares of life"

Looking up the Oxford dictionary, I discovered that the word 'coarsened' means **'not delicate in perception'**. Our hearts could easily become desensitised to Christ's saving message with *the cares and worries of this life*. Trivial concerns could be dragging us down. St Peter says 'unload all your worries on to the Lord, since He is looking after you'. If we believed in these words, nothing would rattle us. But the problem is we only half believe. So, could the cares of life have blurred my perception of Christ's life-giving message and made me less than vigilant. The answer, according to today's Gospel, is a resounding 'yes'.

So in order to become more spiritually attuned, *I need to step back at times from life's treadmill and be still - not just to slow down my body but also and especially my mind*. This is not easy, especially in the run-up to Christmas. How significant it is that at Christmas we find ourselves so easily caught up in twice our normal workload, so that we have no time to listen to Christ's saving message. It's only when we learn to be still and listen that we begin to find him, and understand that union with Him is the very purpose of our existence.

The Synodal process which we've just embarked upon is also a wake-up call for the church of our times. We have a chance this Advent and beyond not just to listen more attentively to the saving words of Christ but also to one another which, according to Pope Francis, is a top priority in the Synodal process. We need to lay aside our prejudices, our biases, our fears, our pre-conceived ideas, our cynicism, our negativity and embrace the process in good faith and with enthusiasm. The synod is about taking one another seriously, especially listening to those whom we might normally be tempted to overlook – people on the margins of Church life. It's about 'launching out into the deep' and moving away from what I call 'a safe pair of hands' Church. It's about speaking the truth with love from our hearts but not 'sugar coating' it. The Synodal process is not about downing those who oppose our views but listening with even more sensitivity to them. Here at St Vincent's we've prepared a letter for everyone in the parish, including those we don't see every Sunday to connect with this exciting two year venture. This is just to get the ball rolling. The Holy Spirit won't disappoint us if we seize this opportunity for a rejuvenated church. But let's make sure we don't disappoint Him.

During Advent we open our minds and hearts to God in preparation for the greatest birthday in the history of mankind. But we also open our minds and hearts to one another so that our Synodal journey will take us, despite our hesitancy, where the Holy Spirit wants us to go. With Mary, during this Advent let's 'treasure all these things and ponder them in our heart'.