

1st Sunday of Advent - Mark 13:31-37

Efficiency and organization are certainly gifts, but they are not the most important ones. There are other qualities that are more fundamental, more necessary for life.

A young naval officer was working his way up the chain of command. One day he was particularly pleased when the captain announced that the next morning the young officer would be in charge of launching the boat from port.

This was a considerable responsibility, and the young officer wanted to do well. So, the next morning he gave a number of rapid commands and the decks were a buzzing with activity. Soon the boat was making its way out of port.

The officer was pleased with himself and was quite sure that he had set a record for the most rapid departure from port. He was therefore not surprised when a seaman came up to him with a note of congratulations from the captain.

He was, however, perplexed that the captain's note was a radio message. It read: "Congratulations on your rapid departure from port. But in your speed, you forgot one important rule: Make sure the captain is on board before you get underway."

Getting underway is something that I think a lot of us are beginning to feel. Because with Thanksgiving behind us, the holiday season is taking off.

As beautiful as this season is, there is no doubt that it places increasing demands upon us. The preparation for family gatherings, for special meals, for shopping and gifts absorbs our time and our energy.

Yet it is possible in the midst of all these activities to miss what is truly important. This is why today's gospel tells us to **stay awake**, to stay awake to life, to stay awake to what really matters.

There is no guarantee that simply because we are in a flurry of activity, we will be able to be awake to what is of true value. The ultimate success of the upcoming weeks will be in our ability to recognize the spiritual and personal dimension of all that we do.

After all, what is the value of spending hours of preparation to call family and friends together, if the activity of that preparation prevents us from appreciating the people who gather?

What advantage is it to find the perfect gift for every person, if the activity of finding that gift makes us irritable or impatient with the people we love?

What is the ultimate importance of checking off everything from our holiday list, if such activity blinds us to the moments of grace that God will place in our life?

Those moments of grace are at the heart of the holiday season. Those moments are what we cannot miss. It is for those moments that we must stay awake. Christ is with us, and Christ does plan to bless us in the upcoming weeks, with tenderness, reconciliation, and joy. But the success of the holidays will depend on our ability to recognize those moments and to take them in.

So how can we do this? How can we remind ourselves of this deeper spiritual reality that is at the heart of the season?

The Cherokee Indians have a beautiful creation story which says that on the day after creation was complete God asked all the

plants of creation to stay awake for seven days in celebration of the earth.

With each passing day more and more of the plants grew tired and fell asleep. On the seventh day only two plants were still awake: the pine tree and the holly bush. So, God blessed them and said to them, “Because you stayed awake, you will remain green forever.

In the heart of the winter you will remain sentinels of life.” So, to this day the Cherokee Indians say that when winter comes, all the other plants lose their leaves and fall asleep. But the pine and the holly bush stay awake.

Now clearly the pine and the holly are traditional signs of Christmas. But I think we would do well to see them as signs of Advent, signs of preparation.

So, in the upcoming weeks as you notice a pine tree or a holly bush standing green against the barren trees and the snow, think of it as staying awake.

Let it remind you to stay awake to the things that really matter. After all, the upcoming weeks are not about our tasks but about our relationships, about the people in our lives.

After all, the upcoming weeks are not about what we will do, but what Christ will do for us. For Christ will indeed bless us with moments of grace. Those moments are what we must not miss. It is for those moments that we must stay awake.

Now it should come as no surprise to us that the success of this season, as of every season, is the presence of Christ with us. Therefore, as this season begins, be sure that Christ is on board before you get underway.