

First Sunday of Advent B - Keep Awake!

November 29, 2020.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13: 33-37)

Happy New Year! For us Chinese Catholics, we have two more (ie Happy New Year) to go. We're in the Liturgical Year B, Mark's Gospel will be used. This Sunday's readings help us to set the right tone for this season. St. Paul in the second reading (1 Corinthians 1:3-9) may be speaking of the Second Coming, but his words remind us that every Advent season is an opportunity for Our Lord to come into our hearts and reveal himself in a special way, building on the spiritual gifts we've already received. In the Gospel (Mark 13:33-37), Our Lord establishes the tone for Advent, even though he is speaking of the Second Coming: vigilant expectation. The Lord first came in a way that nobody expected. In the first reading (Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7) Isaiah was hoping the Lord would come and make mountains quake, but Our Lord was born a baby in a manger instead, hidden to most of the world. **Advent for Christians is time to recall all that Our Lord has given us, along with the hope that he will continue to lavish his spiritual gifts on us.**

Have you ever stayed up all night? Christ calls his disciples and the whole Church to **“keep awake.” Keeping awake is at the heart of Advent, a time of waiting and watching, but it also calls to mind a very human thing: to stay awake when you would normally be sleeping because something or someone is important to attend to.** New parents certainly know what it means to keep awake — to be up all night caring for a child. Many professions are required to keep awake through the night: all first responders, military personnel, and hospital staff must keep awake during the wee hours of the night. Some cleaning, restaurant, retail, and factory staff must keep vigil, working through the night to prepare well for the next day. At some point, every person has cause to be awake through the night, whether for work, for play, for a child or ailing loved ones. With my situation, my lovely wife has to be awake most of the night to attend to my needs. Few weeks ago, our daughter and the grandkids and their friends stayed up the whole night playing games to keep awake as they were raising fund to support Stollery Children's Hospital in Edmonton.

Last Sunday, Philomena and I watched a documentary on **Huangshan** (黄山), literally meaning the **Yellow Mountain(s)**. It is a mountain range in southern Anhui Province in eastern China. The area is well known for its scenic sunsets, peculiarly-shaped granite peaks, pine trees, hot springs, winter snow and views of the clouds from above. Huangshan is a frequent subject of traditional Chinese paintings and literature, as well as modern photography. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of China's major tourist destinations. The mountaintops often offer views of the clouds from above, known as the *Sea of Clouds* because the clouds resemble an ocean. A writer remarked that to enjoy the magnificence of the mountain, one has to look down instead of looking up. The area is notable for light effects, such as the renowned sunrises and a special phenomenon known as *Buddha's Light* (佛光) which only appears a couple of times per month and seeing it is considered a blessing. In 2006, we were on a tour with friends to Huangshan. In order to watch the sunrise and sea of clouds, we had to wake up middle of the night to join other tourists to walk uphill in the cold mountain mist to the scenic area. In our excitement, we stayed awake the whole night hoping to see the “Buddha's Light”.

With Christmas approaching, many are decorating indoor and outdoor preparing to celebrate **the coming of the Lord, Jesus 'birth**. But with the COVID-19 pandemic second wave continues to grow in Alberta, this year we probably will not be able to attend the Christmas midnight mass, we sure will not have family dinners or community parties. **The coming of**

Christmas still creates, in most of us, a sense of both longing and urgency. We call ourselves to keep alert, keep awake, to work hard to get ready for this holiday that's coming whether we like it or not. Though we can't greet our families and loved ones Merry Christmas face to face, with WiFi, we can still FaceTime with them, sharing the virtual turkey dinner and carolling. And if any of you want to have a free turkey, I will send you one, free delivery 😊.

Advent calls us to prepare for something much bigger than just the yearly arrival of Christmas. **Advent calls us to pay attention to the world around us, even as it is wracked with suffering, violence, and hunger.** All the readings this Sunday remind us that our ancestors once called out for a Saviour, and that we are waiting for the return of one. **We wait, and we hope, knowing nothing other than to keep working, keep watching, and keep awake.** In our world torn by pain and division, we look at the pain all around us and we wonder, "how long?" How long will people in our own country and around the world have to live in fear in their communities, in their schools, and in their own homes? How long will we live at odds with our neighbours and endure division in our families? How long will people have to endure violence and hunger and pain, right up to our own doorstep? At our lowest point, we are tempted to wonder if things will be this way forever. But the Advent season that we begin today has a presence that calls us to look deeper. It whispers to us urgently, in the dead of winter: **"Keep awake!" It is a call of urgency to have a change of heart, be aware of our sinfulness and need for God's pardon and forgiveness; to reach out to the disadvantaged and the poor. It is a longing, longing to build a closer relationship with God.** There's no point of celebrating Christmas if Christ is not at home and alive in our hearts. Our saviour is worth waiting for and keeping awake for. **God values our response to his love and there is hope as He promised He will come. He has been waiting for us longer than we have been waiting for Him. Are we awake to welcome Him?**

Advent whispers to us: the night is long and difficult, but the dawn is coming.
"And what I say to you I say to all — keep awake!" (Mark 13:37)