

Advent I
11/28/2021

EVIL LULLABIES

Be vigilant at all times. To be vigilant means we are to wait, not idly or passively, but to actively and attentively wait. Advent could be called the season of vigil since, among other things, it's a season of waiting. Advent, like all our different liturgical seasons, is a way of life. Each liturgical season highlights some different aspect of the Christian life. What we should be doing all the time, we do in a special way during that season. In Advent, we not only prepare to remember Jesus' birth at Christmas—what has happened. We also prepare ourselves for the final coming of Jesus—what has not yet happened. Advent reminds us that our lives are a type of vigil and waiting.

Jesus tells us, *Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy.* We can't stay awake all the time but we can strive to keep our hearts awake. One author has noted that awake means to be spiritually attentive. Heart, doesn't just mean the seat of the emotions nor just an organ in the body but rather the center of who we are. Like someone who is very tired, whose head starts to nod, our hearts can doze off losing attention to what really matters.

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy. There are things that can numb and even anesthetize the heart, lulling it into a deep sleep where it not only does not respond but even ceases to listen. Jesus gives three examples: *carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life.*

Those first two are rather obvious. They drain us physically, which in turn drain us mentally and spiritually, and we know they aren't the only two but rather we could add to that list. Carousing and drunkenness fall under the category of false pleasures, they bring some temporary relief from our stress but in the end they make things worse than they were before. So often our own experiences can confirm this. False pleasures are like false friends. They aren't what they appear to be and in extreme cases can even lead us into slavery, the slavery of addiction.

The purpose of any friendship is for people to lift each other up and not drag each other down. Those activities drag us down. We all have to manage bad feelings

in life but how we manage them makes the difference. Jesus gives examples that numb the heart, that block the ears of the soul and that cause an amnesia of the spirit where one forgets the call of God.

Jesus goes on. He adds, *the anxieties of daily life*. Like carousing and drunkenness, these can, in a different way, also numb the heart, block the ears of the soul and causing an amnesia of the spirit where one forgets the call of God. And these can do so slowly, gradually drawing us down deeper and deeper in a way that we are minimally aware of or maybe not at all. It can take legitimate concerns and accelerate them to where we grow unduly anxious and worried about so many things: family, work, finances, relationships and so much more.

Fear can become a consuming fire that burns everything in its path, even the things of God. St. Francis de Sales noted that after sin itself, the most dangerous thing in the spiritual life is fear. Such fear can close us in on ourselves and away from others and even God. It can make us unreasonably suspicious of everyone and everything, it can draw us so deeply into what surrounds us that we forget the one who is above us. In extreme cases, fear leads to violence verbal or physical. People burn crosses on other people's front lawns because they are afraid of them.

What Jesus describes with these three categories, and we would add with others like them, is an evil lullaby, something that can drug the heart to sleep. What to do about this? One thing is to hear Jesus' call that essentially says, *WAKE UP!* Advent is a season to wake up and realize that carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life aren't merely false friends, they are destructive and beneath the dignity of who we are as children of God.

What if there's another way? What if there's a better way? What if there's a more dignified and more successful way? There is. His way. So one thing to do is to listen, to truly listen, opening what can be the blocked ears of our hearts to the call of God, to the plea of God. St. Benedict opens his *Holy Rule* with the words, *Listen with the ear of your heart*.

Another way is to do what Advent is about, to be vigilant and Jesus tells us that this involves prayer. Prayer is more than saying prayers. Prayer is grounding ourselves in God's love even, it has been said, making ourselves vulnerable to God's

love. Pope Francis has described prayer as the breath of faith—in other words, how we continue to stay alive in the spirit. True prayer is a way to keep our hearts awake.

This also involves staying close to the sacraments, living the ones we have received such as Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders and Marriage and frequently sharing in those we receive more frequently, namely, the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

With confidence in the victory that Christ has already won for us, we seek to avoid the evil lullabies in our lives that make our hearts drowsy. Through vigilance, through prayer, through the sacraments, we seek to listen to the call that tells us to stay awake. May we worthily keep the vigil of this Advent and the vigil of our lives. This Advent, let us ask God for one way to keep our hearts awake. With lives of intentional faith, we ask for the grace to keep our hearts awake and vigilant to the coming of God each day in time and at the completion of all time.