

Keeping Vigil
1st Sunday of Advent (B)
(Mk 13:33-37)

There are many dimensions to prayer, which are all included in the Lord's Prayer. We praise God: "*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name!*" We petition God for our needs: "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" We express sorrow for our sins: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We ask for protection: "*Deliver us from evil.*"

Advent focuses on another dimension of prayer, the longing or desire for God: "*Thy Kingdom come.*" For prayer to be complete, it must be injected with this expectation. Another way to say it, is that prayer seeks or "looks for" God. Yet another way to describe this aspect of prayer is found in the Gospel today, where Jesus says to "stay awake" and "watch."

In biblical times there were no bright street lamps to illumine property and deter burglars. Cities needed watchmen to stay awake and look for miscreants, "thieves in the night." As established by the Romans, there were four roughly three-hour watches, as noted by Jesus: "evening" (i.e. 9pm), "midnight," "cockcrow" (i.e. 3am), and "dawn."

Prayer at night is known as "vigil" prayer. To be vigilant means to be awake and alert. There are still two important times when Catholics observe late night vigils: Christmas and Easter. We also anticipate holy days by means of a vigil the night before, as we do in our parishes with Saturday evening Masses. We also observe the devotional practice of lighting "vigil candles" – candles which burn through the night as a sign of our watchful prayer (even if it is actually our Guardian Angel or the saint who does the staying awake with the prayer intention before God's throne while we go to bed. Is this cheating?).

Recently I came across an article that was describing unusual practices of our ancestors which we no longer do (such as only bathing a few times a year). One of the interesting practices in olden times (i.e. middle ages) was "second sleep." People would wake up for a couple hours at midnight, and then go back to sleep a second time. The article, however, never explained the purpose of this strange practice.

In those "olden times" when society was Catholic and every town or village had at least one monastery, the schedule of the monks governed the rhythm of life even for laity.¹ Strict monasteries observe a midnight office or vigil of readings as

¹ The origin of the Angelus is found in the prayers said by laity in their homes and workplaces when the bells summoned monks to chapel for the chanted Liturgy of the Hours.

part of the Liturgy of the Hours, in fulfillment of the Lord's command to "stay awake and pray." Many laity also observed the practice in their homes. Even today, there is an interest in and commitment to nighttime prayer through the practice of perpetual adoration. Even though the Lord is likely exhorting his disciples in a spiritual sense to "stay awake and pray," nevertheless the Church has always desired to observe this exhortation in practice, literally staying awake at night time for the purpose of prayer, as an expression of love and devotion.

The modern world has found a way through electricity and technology to "stay awake" all night, and there are now many 24-hour establishments, from restaurants to grocery stores to gas stations. But the modern world lacks the element of prayer, the recognition that our life needs to consist of a balance between work and rest, and constant seeking for the Lord regardless of other activities. We thus work to the point of distraction, and sleep without fully resting, and are mystified how people used to be able to get up at night for long readings.

Advent is the invitation to rediscover the aspect of prayer expressed in the petition, "Thy kingdom come." Like a watchman with his small lamp scrutinizing the darkness for the location of the thief, we search the darkness, silence, and "cloud of unknowing" for the hidden ways God comes to us. God does indeed come to us, continually, but like He did 2000 years ago when born in time, He sneaks in "under the radar," missed by the worldly and arrogant, found only by the humble and wise, by those who truly seek Him in love.

Maybe we will not commit ourselves to getting up for an hour each night, but perhaps we should commit at least once during these four weeks of Advent, to getting up and keeping watch in the silence of the night, armed with nothing more than a candle and the words of Sacred Scripture, seeking the God who comes like a thief in the night.