

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
November 29, 2020 Streaming Mass
First Sunday of Advent Year B Mark 13:33-37

Just three days ago our nation celebrated its annual ritual of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Today, we begin our church Advent-Christmas season, although in a much less spectacular fashion. As so many times before, we will, for still another time, begin to go through the story of Jesus. We will hear the challenge and the promise one more time, with the hope that perhaps this year the seed of Jesus' message will fall on more fertile ground; that perhaps this time, what before made only partial sense, will now be able to fit together the jagged pieces of our lives. It is the same Gospel, the same "good news," that is proclaimed again this year, because still we have not grasped it sufficiently, each of us with our own ears, and minds directed to our own set of problems. We may not fully have caught why this message of Jesus is such "good news." We still wait to see how this word of God is like a two-edged sword revealing our deepest need for healing, as at the same time it brings a sense of peace and consolation.

In telling the familiar Gospel story again and again, the church runs the risk of sounding like some doting old man or woman who tells anyone who happens by of their one great triumph in life, or of some famous person whom they met and what he or she said to them, of some historic event they were part of or witnessed years ago. But the Church has no choice but to go on repeating itself, whether at times that retelling be an inspiring, passionate recounting, or perhaps just as often something lifeless and mechanical. These stories must be retold again and again to preserve for us the possibility of hearing them, as it were, for the very first time. The words of the poet Robert Frost are especially appropriate in this context, when he wrote, "Our very life depends on everything recurring till we answer from within. The thousandth time may prove the charm." There is no guarantee that on that thousandth time the Gospel will be preached with any greater insight or clarity. What is essential is that the same story of Jesus of Nazareth truly land for the first time in an unstopped ear and an open heart.

Paul Claudel, the French diplomat, essayist, playwright and poet, recounted his conversion from agnosticism to Catholicism; of how he went, as he had done many times before, more as an unbeliever than as a believer, simply to hear the music at the Christmas Vespers Service in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris; and how suddenly, and much to his own surprise, as he looked up to the beautiful Rose Window before him, he became vividly aware for the first time of God's presence in his life. Quite

overcome by this unasked for and unexpected sense of peace, he went on to dedicate his considerable talents in poetry and drama to disclosing the presence of God in all creation. Again, "the thousandth time may prove the charm" for any one of us.

As the people of God, as Christians, as Catholics, we come together every week to preserve the memory of the Lord Jesus that it may be more than just a memory, more than just an echo of a life lived far away and long ago; but that His living Spirit might open for us possibilities we may have forgotten had existed; that our imagination might be enlarged, and our appetites whetted to become dissatisfied with much of what the world offers us as its very best; that we might discover in the pattern of the life of Jesus, our own way of being in the world, a way that makes sense, that provides connections with what really matters, and that helps us sort out the genuine from the fake and the phony.

The outline of the life of Jesus is sketched the same every year, but it waits to be filled in with the colorings, the shadings, the subtle tints and highlights, the charcoal grays, of our own lives. To make the Gospel come alive, each of us has to bring the story of our individual lives and match it to the story of the life of Jesus—not in fear, or flagellating guilt, or boasting pretense or pious self-justification. Simple honesty is all that is required of us. But we cannot wait too long; there may not be thousandth time to "prove the charm."

A Spanish poet by the name of Antonio Machado once said of Jesus, "All his words were one word: wake up." These are the words we have just heard in today's Gospel. We can be so dulled by the pressures, the stress, the responsibilities of every day life that we lose the sense of a spiritual connection to what truly matters. What Jesus offers us is the chance to have a clearer perception of what is actually going on within us and without us, so as to be able to respond with courage, trust and love. Advent is our "wake-up call." Let's not press the snooze button and wait for still another day.