

September 6, 2020 The Watchman Homily: In Hasidic Jewish folklore there is a story of a rabbi who is walking through the village late one night. He unexpectedly encounters another man, a stranger, who is walking alone. For a while the two men walk in silence. Finally, the Rabbi turns to the man and asks, "For whom are you working?" "I work for the village", replied the stranger. "I am the night watchman". The rabbi nodded his head. "I see."

They walk in silence a little longer.

Finally, the night watchman turns to the rabbi and asks, "And you, sir, for whom are you working?"

Silence.

The story ends!

The rabbi could very well have replied, "I am in the service of the God of Israel" or "I am the guardian of the Lord's flock" or "I am the teacher of the word and the messenger of God." He could have added that he is called upon to admonish the sinner and praise the righteous, among the people entrusted to his care.

Perhaps the story ends abruptly because the question is addressed to each one of us. For whom am I working?

In 1967, the American songwriter Bob Dylan wrote a song which was later recorded by the legendary Jimmy Hendrix, "All Along the Watchtower." The watchtower is a fortification. It could be a high stone wall, a tower, or even a natural barrier such as a hill.

In today's first reading from the Book of the prophet Ezekiel, We are introduced to the "the night watchman". "You, son of man, I have appointed watchman of the House of Israel." (Ez. 33:7) Standing at his post he must warn the people of the approach of a foreign invader. They must be warned in time and not taken by surprise. Once the enemy is in sight, he blows his trumpet, signaling trouble ahead. If the prophet fails to deliver the warning, he alone must take responsibility. It is not surprising that the watchman is one who, according to biblical scholars, is a lonely man who suffers many sleepless nights.

The second task of the watchman is to admonish the sinner. "Son of man, I have appointed you a sentinel for the House of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth you will warn them for me." (Ez. 3:17) The sinner must turn from his evil ways. Yes, the Lord is patient with the sinner but he must understand he is in danger of being cut off from the Lord if he does not change his wicked ways. The watchman's dire warning must be heeded. It is a matter of life and death.

As Catholics, the tasks of the watchman may remind us of three of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, namely, instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful and admonish the sinner.

How often in our past have we kicked ourselves for failing to take the good counsel of others, and then suffered the consequences. Our stubbornness and stupidity blinded us to the truth about ourselves. "If

only I had listened”, is a troubling thought that preoccupies our thoughts in the aftermath of making a bad choice or decision.

An example: Clive Owens was working as a telegraph operator on board a ship, the SS California, which was then on a transatlantic voyage in 1912. One day, a clearly distraught Captain of the ship entered his cabin and instructed Owens to contact immediately the other ship in the vicinity. Ice packs were forming on the seas. Ships in the area were in extreme danger!

His first call was ignored by the telegraph operator of the other ship. It turned out to be a ghastly misjudgment. The ship was on its maiden voyage, the Titanic. Fifteen hundred passengers and crewmen lost their lives in one of the most tragic maritime disasters in history. If only the telegraph operator of the Titanic had heeded the warning!

The House of Israel failed to comply with the prophet’s demands. The consequences were nothing less than disastrous. Babylon soon destroyed the City of Jerusalem. Even the righteous of the city were not spared.

We are in need of “watchers” today in the home, our courts and legislatures, in our classrooms and centers of entertainment, and, needless to say, our churches and synagogues.

For whom are we working?

Amen!