

“Be watchful! Be alert!” (Mk 13:33). You do not know when the Lord will return. Last November, Fr Alphonsus left Saint Michael, Stebbins and Unalakleet for a 40-day vacation. Likewise, Fr Aiden left for his home country leaving the villages of St Mary, Pilot Station and Mountain Village. As the US government tightened procedures, they were not granted access to for their Visa renewals in a timely fashion. For over a year now, they have been watchful and alert for a chance to return to village ministry. A second Christmas will pass and they are still watching for an opportunity to return. The tremendous backlog and the complications of the coronavirus have made it most difficult. It may be several more months before they return to serve in our diocese. Until then, they patiently wait, looking for some sign that they may connect with the embassy in Nigeria and then book tickets. Please pray that they will be able to return sooner rather than later to serve in their respective villages.

October 13th, Bishop Chad was able to travel to Mountain Village and offer Mass for the people of Saint Lawrence Parish. There was a hunger and an expectation from the people to participate in Mass for the first time in many moons even if common sense dictated that squeezing into the church would be too close for comfort. Coronavirus cases had been on the rise, so everyone agreed to meet Bishop Chad at the airstrip for an outdoor Mass. It was 27 degrees and windy, certainly less than ideal. 75 people braved the weather to hear the Good News proclaimed and to actively participate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The people were so thankful. A hundred times over, the bishop heard a heartfelt *Quyana*.

Bishop Chad could not help but think back to similar circumstances from his deployments in the military. In Afghanistan he often gathered at a remote site to celebrate Mass outdoors. In both circumstances, he was “gathered with the faithful in primitive surroundings to welcome the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, on a humble tabletop.” When the ability to gather as a community is limited by circumstances beyond our control, that encounter with Christ in the liturgy, is often a tearful experience for both the flock and the shepherd. It was as if the Holy Spirit had planned the words of the bishop’s homily: “On this mountain, the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples...The Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face...” (Is 25:6-10). The holy longing of the good people of Mountain Village was very moving. There were no complaints for the inability of the church to provide a pastor for months on end. People were simply thankful to God.

“Be watchful! Be alert! ... you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight” (Mk 13:33,35a). In 2014 in the month of November, I was in Little Diomed. The diocese had been without a shepherd for an entire year with the reassignment of Bishop Kettler to Saint Cloud Minnesota in 2013. [Bishop Kettler has just recovered from a 3-week bout with the Coronavirus prior to his 76th birthday so please keep him in your prayers along with all the elderly.] On the 8th of November 6 years ago, the Diocese was set to announce the appointment of Major Chad Zielinski as the next bishop of Fairbanks. I had received a cryptic phone call the day before, inviting me to phone in and listen to a special announcement. Before I could phone in, there was a knock at the door and one of my parishioners needed to talk. A priest always needs to be watchful and alert. Sometimes it is a knock on the front door that alters our plans. Sometimes it is a call in the middle of the night to rush to the hospital. Sometimes it is a text to visit the emergency room on Thanksgiving Day that alters one’s plans. Jesus comes in disguise, humbly asking for help. We never know when, we must always be on the alert.

It is easy for us to grow weary of being watchful and alert. No one likes to wear a mask. We all crave to be able to be uplifted in song, to offer the sign of peace, to sit without concern

for social distancing, to see everyone return to the church. Fr. Dismas from the Dominican Friars in Anchorage comes to Fairbanks once a month to offer the Latin Mass and assist at Immaculate Conception. Two weeks ago, he returned to Anchorage on Sunday, felt ill the following day, and then tested positive for COVID. At present, all the Dominican friars are on lockdown due to this COVID exposure. As a result, the Dominicans are quarantining and have canceled all public Masses at Holy Family Cathedral until December 2nd.

Fr Steve, the Rector of the Community advised his flock: “The reality of Covid-19 is symbolic of a world completely infected by sin. Hopelessness, vanity and isolation becomes king when we do not recognize the soul’s deepest desire to know, love and serve God. Without the mercy of Christ the King given to us by his Cross and Resurrection, we are doomed to eternal isolation from others and God as sure as the exigencies, and their side effects, of stopping Covid-19 have physically, spiritually and emotionally isolated so many people around the world in the year 2020.”

“Be watchful! Be alert! Our Lord is coming. We know not the hour nor the day. We do know that on occasion we have hardened our hearts ... an ear that did not listen, an eye that did not see, a hand that did not reach out to help another. In anger, we did not respond with love. In pride, we did not respond with humility. In lust, we did not respond with respect. “We have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.”

The Lord hungers for us to return to him. He stretches out his arms on the cross to reach out to us. When we stray, the tears well up in his eyes. We must look within and acknowledge our own lack of vigilance. Advent is a time to confess our sins and start anew. Renewed with the grace of God, cleansed through the forgiveness of our sins, purified by prayer and little sacrifices for the spiritual benefit of others, we wake to a new dawn and a brighter future. “O LORD, ... we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands” (Isa 64:7).