

Homily for September 5, 2017

As we watched Hurricane Harvey wreck havoc on Southern Texas last week I was both appalled and amazed. Appalled that people took advantage of this disaster to impersonate police officers, and so issue evacuation orders. To what end? So they could then rob the homes of the people who had left.

I was also amazed by the courage and generosity of so many, who came to the assistance of their fellow Texans. Men like Houston Police Officer Sergeant Steve Perez, who left home early Sunday morning to “do his duty”, but was subsumed by flood waters and his body was only found on Tuesday, August 29th.

How we handle and react to life’s crisis is such a barometre of the state of our soul.

St. Paul in today’s reading from Thessalonians speaks of another Crisis, the 2nd Coming of Jesus. This letter is the earliest of Paul’s New Testament correspondences, written around 51 AD. In Paul’s early letters we are left with the understanding that he thought the 2nd Coming of Christ was imminent.

So he speaks of the 2nd Coming this way:

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

Now what do we do with verses like this? We know that the 2nd Coming did not occur during Paul’s life time and here we are 2000 years later, and the return of Christ has not yet occurred.

This is where I think we can ponder on what happened last week in Houston and environs. We can live our life with a sense that each day will unfold, like the previous day. But as we also know from the 2013 floods, things can change in an instant. We can experience this on the civic, provincial or national levels as indeed we can experience it on the personal level. Illness comes to us, unemployment, bereavement to name just three.

What Paul’s teaching reminds us to consider is not to take life for granted. We are to live both thankfully for each day and attentively.

Such attentiveness Paul describes this way:

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

As Christians we know in a particular way that our time in this world is relatively short. And even if the Lord’s coming is delayed thousands of years, comparatively speaking each of our lives in relation to eternity is like a mist, here one minute and then gone. The crisis of death will meet us all.

With this in mind, Paul encourages us to live each day, as people who are day people. What does this mean?

So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

We are not be like people, who lose sight of the trajectory of life. To stay awake and sober means to live each day in light of the Final Day..... Be that the day of our death or the Day when Jesus will come again. Both can take us unawares. And if we live consciously attentive to the end Paul declares to us:

9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

When we think of the wrath of God, this includes two dimensions. One is passive and one active. The passive dimension of God's wrath is that he gives us over to ourselves. If we decide to live as people of the night, instead of the day, we will experience the consequences. That is what is experienced in the present. But there is also God's active wrath where in the end he will separate people from himself because of their wilfulness and self-centred and dark ways.

But for those living attentive to Jesus and life's destiny we looked forward to salvation where we will live with Christ. It is with this end in mind that we can encourage each other to pursue a life of holiness in the present.

The psalmist summarized this succinctly when at the conclusion of the psalm he declared:

***I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
14 Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD***

The present life is a time of waiting for the life that is to come where in the land of the living we will see and know the goodness of Jesus that presently we trust in by faith and hope.