

Be an open door & an alert doorkeeper

First Sunday of Advent – Cycle B – November 29, 2020

Readings: Isa 63:16b-17; 64:1, 3b-8; 1 Cor 2:3-9; Mk 13:33-37

“... a man going on a journey, when he leaves home puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch” (Mk 13:34)

Prologue: We begin the season of Advent in the B-Cycle of the liturgical year on a note of hope and expectancy. Year B will mainly have readings from the Gospel according to Mark, supplemented with readings from the Gospel according to John. The symbol of door and doorkeeper could help us to string together our reflections to highlight the theme of working, waiting and watching for the coming, the ‘advent’ of Christ.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is from the ‘psalm of lament’ covering Isa 63:7 to 64:11. The Israelites have returned, repentant, from the Babylonian Exile. Aware of their infidelity and sinfulness as individuals and as God’s chosen people, not only do they want to ‘re-turn’ to God but want God to return and dwell in their midst, so to say—that they might experience his paternal providence as their ‘Father’ (63:16), his secure rule as their Master, they being ‘servants’ (63:17) and his craftsmanship as their Creator, they being but clay in the Divine Potter’s hands (64:8). Their longing for Yahweh to come down and intervene in their lives is echoed by their fervent plea: “Return!” they beg God, “Oh that you would *tear open the heavens* and come down!” In their three-tiered cosmic view—with God above and Hades below—God is asked to open heaven’s doors and come down to revitalize and redeem them. The “tearing open” of the heavens is a beautiful image of God being revealed and accessible as also recorded in Jesus’ Baptism (Mk 1:10). This cry for divine intervention has long been associated with Advent.
2. One need not labour to highlight the door and doorkeeper theme, for it is fairly clear in the gospel’s ‘parable of the doorkeeper’. This passage from the Gospel according to Mark was probably written just after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when the Christians expected that the end of the world was imminent. The gospel passage cautions against such a mentality, correcting and informing the Christians that they really did not know when Christ would come again. However, in this state of eager expectancy and hopeful waiting, they are exhorted to take on two roles: of a servant and a doorkeeper. This means that they are to work and to watch, respectively. The master—here, referring to Christ—“puts his *slaves* in charge, each with his work”—thereby expecting them to work; and additionally, “commands the *doorkeeper* to be on the watch” (v.34). Working and watching involve both, activity and passivity. A good worker watches; a good watchman works. In reality they are not two distinct activities done by two persons but one person doing two dimensions of the one act of being prudent and prepared. Preparedness has this nondual dimension: an external working with one’s hands and feet, and an internal watching with one’s heart and soul. In other words, prudence and preparedness require one to be both, the door as well as the doorkeeper: open and welcoming, besides being dutiful, discerning and demanding too.
3. A good door ought to be strong enough to keep thieves and unwelcome guests out, and easily openable by a doorkeeper when the master or his invited guests arrive: for he “does not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight,

or at cockcrow, or at dawn” (v.35). Unlike the Palestinian division of time into three watches—first, second and third—of the day, this 4-four division of the day seems an adaptation of the Roman system. Be that as it may, the point made is that, as doorkeeper, one must be ready to open the door at any time, 24 x 7; and as servant, one should have completed all the entrusted tasks to the master’s satisfaction. Indeed, first, being door implies being Christlike; for, Jesus refers to himself as “the door” (Jn 10:9) and, at the end of times we will hear him say, “Listen, I stand at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you” (Rev 3:20). This door opening inward then stands as a ‘door of love’, so to say, welcoming the Lord to enter and abide within. Second, you and I can also ask the Lord to open our “door of faith” (Acts 14:27) that all people might know Christ and rest secure in God’s reign. Third, we can be that “door of hope” (Hos 2:15) — a “wide door for effective work” (1 Cor 16:9) working, and providing opportunities for encounter and evangelization. Love, leading to faith, and opening out to hope, then, are the doors to be watchful about.

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme:

- Corresponding to the first reading, today’s psalm (80) is also a community lament, a cry for divine intervention: “O Lord, come to save us!” The “man you have chosen” in the psalm proximately refers to Israel’s king. However, it is also a reference to the Messianic King, Jesus, whom the people await with longing. Thus, the psalm becomes a petition to God to send the Messiah
- In the second reading, Paul glorifies God for the blessings showered upon his people. These blessings are ‘charisms’ for ministry. Paul exhorts his people to utilize these graces so that “you may not be without the gifts of the Spirit while you are *waiting* for our Lord Jesus to be revealed.” In framing all gifts and blessings in an eschatological (end-time) context, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the ‘already and not-yet’, meaning, every gift and blessing received today must be so fully utilized for God’s greater glory, so that when God is fully revealed—at “the end the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.8), we might be ready to hand over and account for all that has been gifted to us.

Reflect on Doors and Doorkeepers:

Pope Francis – Doorkeeper with Open Doors: “The Church is a home with open doors, because she is a mother. And in imitation of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, we want to be a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth from its sacristies, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity... to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation” (*Fratelli Tutti* 276)

Mahatma Gandhi and Closed Doors: During his student days M K Gandhi became interested in Christianity and was fascinated by Jesus and his ‘*Sermon on the Mount*’. Keen on finding a solution to the cancerous caste system in India, he went one Sunday to a church in South Africa to attend Mass. The doorkeeper gently told him: “If you want to attend Mass, you are welcome to go to a church reserved for blacks.” He left and never returned to any church.

A public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden to enter the church or participate in any of the sacraments. Upon strict instructions of the parish priest, the watchman closed the doors of the church as he was trying to slip in for Mass. Distraught, he prayed to Jesus, “Lord, they won’t let me in because I’m a sinner!” He heard God’s voice reply: “Why are you complaining? They won’t let me in, either!”
