

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 29 November 2009, the first Sunday of Advent, in lectionary year C.*

One of the greatest liturgical theologians is a Jesuit at Boston College named John Baldovin. Before joining the faculty at Weston Jesuit, John was at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, and since theirs was part of a consortium of seminaries, I was able to learn as much from John as I did from the faculty at the Episcopal seminary. Now most liturgists will confess to a list of things or quirks that bug them, and as these lists go, John's is fairly short. But on his list is one thing that he drilled into me: John doesn't like priests to wear watches. You heard me, wrist watches. They're distracting, he says, and the other thing he says when he's complaining about wearing watches is that our concept of time should be different when we're worshipping. So it's better not to wear watches; that's his point. You'll find my watch on the table in the clergy sacristy, not on my wrist.

The downside of John's idiosyncratic tutelage is that I'm forever asking for the time. The first thing I said to Robie White last Sunday, as the service ended, was "what time is it?"

It's time for another season of Advent. Today we pin up a new spiritual calendar, not unlike what we'll do on January 1st when we begin the year 2010. Advent is a season to wait for, and to prepare for, the coming of Christ. But it's always out of sync with everything around us. On Thanksgiving evening I counted seven houses that were fully decked for Christmas, including illuminated Christmas trees in the front windows. Unlike the culture around us, though, the church is in no great hurry to get to Christmas. As we launch a new church year we begin a new round of telling a story that reaches back to the beginning of time and forward to the world's end.

Today's readings and hymnody are filled with strange images of what the end-time might be like, with disturbances in the sun and moon and stars, and the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great glory. Everything we are doing today reminds us that we're part of a story of cosmic proportions.

Instead of my asking Robie "what time is it?" maybe we should be asking Jesus himself, or better yet, ourselves. The answers would run the gamut. For younger people time stands still, for adolescents time creeps slowly, and yet, it simultaneously goes too fast. For those of us who are middle-aged we're often wondering whether what we're doing is what we're supposed to be doing. There's still time to change, but what would that mean? For the most elderly among us time has a poignant longing, a sense of fulfillment, and at times, a bit of regret.

No matter what our age, the burden of Jesus' message is that it's not too late. You name it....it's not too late. It's not too late to say I love you, or I forgive you, or I need you. It's not too late to say I was wrong, or I'm sorry. It's not too late to say I need this church, and I need to give it my all. It's not too late.

My friend Diana is here this morning, but her presence is incidental to what I'm about to share. Diana's mother, long since gone to her reward, used to turn to Diana and say, "be kind, Diana." And over the years Diana has turned to me, and to others, and said the same thing: "be kind." So it was a little unnerving, in a good way, on my second day as your new rector, to find something on the bottom drawer of the rector's desk. It was the manuscript of your former rector's final sermon preached here. And like Diana's mother, Bob was suggesting that being kind mattered.

Advent is a time to take back time, and to ask about time. But above everything else we might take this Advent, simply and quietly, to be kind. Jesus put it this way, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap" (Luke 21:34).

Now listen to Eugene Petersen's translation in his version of the New Testament entitled *The Message*: "Be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise. . . ."

Warding off getting dulled by parties and shopping can be done in lots of ways, among them is to be kind. In doing so we'll join God in changing the world, returning it to peace. We'll still need to be kind at the end of Advent, and next Easter, and next Summer. But the time is now. We start today.

Who says so? The Christ of Advent who says that when we see a fig tree sprouting leaves we'll know that summer is near. Kindness will be the tree whose sprouts tell us that we're creating a new world, one that shall not pass away. A crucial byproduct of holy living.

What time is it? Professor Baldovin is right: the wrist watch distracts because we already know what time it is. A blessed, and kind, Advent to us all.