

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

AWAKE

Year A – Advent Sunday – Romans 13: 11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Romans 13:11-14 **An Urgent Appeal**

11 'Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; 13 let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires'.

Matthew 24:36-44 **The Necessity for Watchfulness**

36 'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'.

Both Paul and Jesus speak urgently. *'It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep', 'Keep awake...you also must be ready.'* We need to be ready, Jesus warns, because we do not know when our Lord will return. How do we feel about this? Do we think that we have ample time for repentance? Are we mindful of the fact that Christ will come to each one of us when our earthly span is done?¹

'Keep awake', Jesus tells us. We realise he is not talking simply about wakefulness. As Paul makes clear, being awake is about active participation – it requires us to *'lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light...put on the Lord Jesus Christ'.*

¹ Raymond Chapman, *Following the Gospel Through the Year* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2001)

This is an invitation to be hopeful people, people who *'lay aside the works of darkness'* so as to be fully focussed on the grace and love of God; hopeful people, whose *'task [it] is to work out how to live as though the Lord is coming soon.'*²

We don't find this easy. But who does? Even those who we might mark out as saintly struggle daily. Take George Herbert, for example, the brilliant, seventeenth century poet and Anglican priest, whose poems have inspired so many over the centuries. Herbert, deeply devout from an early age was by all accounts destined for a glittering career in court circles. When, after illness and the call to priesthood he became a parish priest, his poems tell of his constant struggle with his own sinfulness.³

In a poem entitled 'Dullness' (verses 1, 6 & 7) Herbert writes:

*Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull,
As if I were all earth?
O give me quickness, that I may with mirth
Praise thee brim-full!*

*But I am lost in flesh, whose sugared lies
Still mock me, and grow bold:
Sure thou didst put a mind there, if I could
Find where it lies.*

*Lord, clear thy gift, that with a constant wit
I may but look towards thee:
Look only, for to love thee, who can be,
What angel fit?*

Herbert speaks to our own battles with inner 'dullness'. *'Why do I languish thus, drooping and dull, as if I were all earth? Give me quickness...'* Herbert wants to be more alive to God, to be generous to God and *'praise [Him] brim-full!'* But he finds himself *'drooping and dull'*.

Movingly, Herbert speaks to the human condition: *'I am lost in flesh, whose sugared lies / Still mock me and grow bold.'* Herbert's anguish is that he is lost in *'sugared lies'*, so he can only look... his gaze clouded, his mind dulled. He knows that he cannot find spiritual alertness on his own: *'Sure though didst put a mind there, if could find where it lies. Lord, clear thy gift...'* And so he prays that if he cannot love - *'for to love thee, who can be / What angel fit?'* - God will *'clear'* his mind - His *'gift'* - that, at least, he may look.

2 Rosalind Brown, *Fresh from the Word: A Preaching Companion* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2016)

3 Richard Harries, *Wounded I Sing: From Advent to Christmas with George Herbert* (London, SPCK, 2024)

But the *'sugared lies'* give Herbert the impetus to do something:

'In the final, subtle lines he trusts that God has put a mind in him which will offer praise, but he cannot find it. What he can do however is look. For who can truly love God? He can't, but he can look. And that is in fact what the wisest or spiritual guides tells us. Whether we are exalting or drooping, it may be that what is required of us is simply to look to God and wait on him'.⁴

Like Herbert, we too feel the anguish; the spiritual torment of *'sugared lies'*: distractions, laziness, fear and self-protection, lies that turn our lives inwards and make us defensive and ungenerous.

Herbert sees that loving God is not an achievement, but a sign that the image of God is awake within us. He yearns for his heart and mind to be cleared of *'dullness'* so that he can, at least, gaze on God.

We know our gaze is clouded: we are apt to languish, to prevaricate, be complacent. But Jesus' warning and Paul's urgent appeal remind us that this is not how it must be for *'believers'*.

As N.T. Wright insightfully explains:

'The day has already begun to dawn with the coming of Jesus, so that Jesus' followers are already people of the day. The promise - and warning - of God's future is meant to inculcate neither helplessness nor complacency, but rather energy to work as day people in a world that thinks it's still night'.⁵

Be alert, be ready

Right now, at the beginning of Advent, we are called afresh to wake up! *'You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep'*. In this call to personal holiness, St Paul's images of night and day, sleep and waking remind us forcibly how much we too are *'drooping and dull'* as we cling to worldly *'darkness'*. It is time, Paul tells us, to step out into the generous daylight of God.

Thus, Paul's invitation *'to wake from sleep'* is not merely a matter of alertness, but of transformation. As we approach Advent, we are summoned to shake off spiritual sleepiness and be awake to the depth of God's mercy. Jesus' warning is meant to make us focus. It is a call to live generously because generosity is the natural expression of those who are awake and alert ... alert to God's calling on our lives, alert to the needs of others, *ready* for opportunities to share God's love with others.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays* (London, SPCK, 2006)

Are we ready? *'One will be taken and one will be left'*. What matters is the kind of people we are becoming, now.

Looking at God

In humility, Herbert understands that he cannot love God perfectly, but he can *look* at God.

And in looking, he sees that God has been looking at him first, with mercy, compassion and generosity. Putting on the *'armour of light'*, putting on Christ, therefore, is not a process of self-improvement, it is the response - the natural response - of hearts and minds that are awake to God's loving gaze. Loving generously, then, begins with looking at God. We look at God - and transformation begins, and we begin to see that our lives are completely dependent on the infinite generosity of God.

As we move into Advent, Herbert reminds us that we do not have to be especially awake to look at God. We begin with attention - a heart turned towards God, and we look - and we keep looking. And in looking, we see that God has already given us generous hearts; our task is to awaken them.