

Be Alert

November 16, 2003 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

What does today's collect mean by saying that we should, "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" Holy Scriptures? Today's lessons are troubling. They don't seem to contain good news, but are more intent on speaking about the end of time. We have warnings about the last days of human history. Both Daniel and the 13th chapter of Mark are called apocalyptic writings. What are we to learn from these strange writings?

Many years ago, one of my favorite television shows featured a young boy on an adventure. This was back in the days of black and white television, but we learned he had red hair. The actor's name was Billy Mummy. He and his family were a galactic Swiss Family Robinson "lost in space." A bumbling, self-serving adult called Dr. Smith often accompanied Billy. A big hulking robot most often protected the two of them. I can remember the robot almost every episode crying out, "WARNING! WARNING! Warning, Will Robinson!"

The robot sought to protect Will and his family. It was his job to be alert and point out the dangers that faced Will and the others. Daniel and Jesus are the ones issuing the warnings today. In both of their times, as well as ours, there are dangers that threaten our lives and souls. Jesus alerts us to the dangers about us.

Alerts are an interesting thing. We have something called the "amber alert". It gets issued every time that a child in New Jersey is abducted and that act is reported. It is meant to alert law enforcement, the media and the public so that we might aid in the efforts to locate the child. We have something called the National Terror Alert System. It was designed after September 11th to alert us to the potential terror threats. Do you know what "color" we are in today? Most of us probably don't know. I remember during the cold war another type of alert systems was designed. It's called "DEFCON". It stands for defense condition and it alerted military and government leaders to the possibility of attack or conflict.

We have all these kinds of alerts, but a curious thing happens. Our attention wanes and lessens. We become slower and slower in our responses to alerts. It's like the tale of the little boy who cried wolf. You know the story. The boy cried "wolf" when no wolf was present. The town people came out armed to meet the threat, but we angry to find the boy laughing at their response. Each time the boy cries wolf, the townspeople become desensitized to the alert. Finally, when the wolf does appear, the townspeople ignore the real threat. The little boy is eaten. We too become numb to alerts. The lack of a threat, or the energy we expend decreases over time.

The real problem is that we tend to only see things that immediate and concern us. The alerts lose their power and meaning. This is nothing new. We get warnings all of our life, but we learn to ignore them as well! Think about how we treat our youngsters. We start at an early age to issue warnings, "Don't touch that! Don't go in the street!" We know the dangers that are out there. There is the hot stove, or the cars in the road. Most of the time, our children heed the warnings. We are trying to protect and teach our children about the dangers out in the world.

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It doesn't stop does it? Think about the warnings we issue to our teens: "Don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't speed. Don't have sex." Again, we are trying to protect our young people. But something else begins to creep in at this age. I call it resistance. It's the attitude that we carry the rest of our life: "I'm immune to that. It won't happen to me. I won't get caught. I'm different." We resist the warnings, and learn to ignore them.

The result is that when tragedy strikes, and it will, we aren't equipped to deal with it. Remember September 11th? We thought we were immune from the world's terror. Then there is the person who hears from the doctor, "You have cancer." Or, "You have AIDS." There are the shocking horrible events of Columbine, or the three youths arrested in Oaklyn. There is the shock of the Barker murder here in quiet Haddonfield. The warning signs are often there. We ignore them. Then we are shocked by what happens! What a surprise! I believe the problem is that we have become too narrow in our outlook. We have allowed ourselves to be too self-focused, too self-reliant, too self-centered. We lack the vision of Daniel to see evil and to know that we must turn to God. The writers of the apocalyptic writings knew something about human nature, that we put too many things before and between God and us. The result is shock, death and lost. It results in our not knowing where to look, not knowing where to find God.

Daniel, Revelation, parts of Isaiah and Mark 13th are those writings that recognize the sad state of the world. The situation in all these times are great persecution, suffering and death. The faithful people are being hunted down. These writings are meant to encourage people to persevere in the face of persecution. They recognize that things have gotten so bad, that evil is so rampant, that it will take God directly intervening to set things right. But the apocalyptic writings also remind us of something. They say that God is on the side of the faithful. God is with us. God loves us. Because of this, we must remain faithful!

The message today is be alert! The message today is live differently! I am reminded of my first work with people who had AIDS about 15 years ago. I learn how to live differently from those people. They taught me how to live each day as if it was the last. None of us knows if we will be here tomorrow. What would we do if we were told that today is our last day? How would we live life differently? War and conflict wouldn't be so important, would they? The pursuit of things, power, control, buying and collecting would lose their allure. We might seek to enjoy the day. We most likely would seek to be with the people we loved the most. We might even try to give away our "things." We might take time to smell the roses, listen to our favorite music and enjoy the day. If we were told this was our last day, we would live differently.

Perhaps the next thing that might enter into our minds would be, "What's next?" What is there after this life? We might think about God and even seek God. What is there after this life? What happens to us? Enter now Jesus. He says to us, "Wake up! Be alert!" Jesus is like to robot in Lost in Space calling out warnings to us! Jesus is our protector. His ministry is one of turning our hearts, minds and lives from the traps of the world back to God!

Jesus calls the disciples, and us, to take greater responsibility for our faith. He calls us to be better steward. Jesus reminds us that God loves us and to proclaim the Good News! He

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announces that our God reigns now live like we believe it! Christ has already conquered death; we need not fear it, now live like we believe it! Jesus tells us that the only thing that really matters is LOVE! Now is the time for us to come alive in God. Now is the time to recognize that God loves us. The alert has sounded, now it is time for us to be ready or be left behind.

I would like to end with a little story. There was a little old lady in the parish who attended every Bible study class, every educational offering. She was faithful in her attendance. One day, during a class, a young woman approached her. “Why are you here?” asked the young woman. “Surely someone of your age has learned all there is to know. You must know everything by now.” The little old lady smiled softly at the younger woman. She answered, “I’m cramming for the final!”

Jesus calls us to be alert! It’s time to cram for the final. Today may be our last day. How will we live it?