

**Homily for the First Sunday of Advent, Year B; November 27, 2011
(Isaiah 63: 16b-17, 19b and 64: 2-7; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37)**

KEEP WATCH FOR CHRIST WHO COMES OFTEN

Perhaps the best known novel of the British author Graham Greene (1904-1991) is *The Power and the Glory* (1940). It is about a priest who defies an anti-Catholic government in Mexico and ministers underground until he is caught and executed. Unfortunately, this story is based on the historical fact that a vicious persecution of the church, especially of the clergy, occurred in the Mexico of the 1920s. I think that most Americans are not aware of this persecution because we know that Mexico is a Catholic country. But strange things happen in revolutionary times and the Mexican Revolution turned against the church; indeed, until just a few years ago, priests and nuns were not legally permitted to wear their religious garb in Mexico. I first became aware of this prohibition when I was a student at St. Charles in the late 1950s and one of our teachers, a priest, was planning a trip to Mexico; he told us that he would not take his clerical attire because he could be arrested if he wore it there. I was shocked!

Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* is based roughly on the life and martyrdom of Blessed Miguel Pro (1891-1927), a Jesuit priest who was executed by a Mexican firing squad on November 23, 1927. Pope John Paul II beatified Miguel Pro in 1988 and his feast day was this past week. I say that Greene based his story "roughly" on Father Pro because the priest in *The Power and the Glory* is portrayed as a weak man. He is called the "whiskey priest" and that nickname reveals only one of his several vices. The priest himself thinks that he is a complete failure and, on the morning of his execution, he regrets that he will go to God with very little to show for his life.

And yet the common people will revere this priest as a martyr. Despite his weaknesses, he brings Christ to the peasants as he moves from village to village in secrecy to say Mass and to minister the other sacraments. In the theology of the Catholic Church, he is a sacrament himself because, through ordination, he has the power to make Jesus present to the people. Like Jesus, the priest is a surprise when he shows up – much to the delight of the villagers who are willing to take the risk of allowing the sacraments to be celebrated. The priest comes when they least expect him – and they are happy to see him and to welcome Christ in him. Everyone knows that the priest is a weak man but everyone believes that he brings Christ to them.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Today we begin a new translation of the Mass and a new church year – the year B when we proclaim the Gospel of Mark on most Sundays. Our gospel today is then from Mark and in it we hear Jesus tell us to be watchful and alert. He tells us to watch as if we were servants waiting for the return of their master who has gone on a journey. And we do not know when the master will return – so we must always be ready for his coming.

The gospel for today obviously is chosen because it ushers in the Advent themes. We disciples are to wait patiently for the coming (or Advent) of the kingdom. Jesus is the one who brings with him this kingdom or reign of God. And we in turn find the kingdom of Christ among us when we are faithful to him because we the baptized are his Body. Of course, Jesus will come at the end of time – and St. Mark means to remind us of that in this gospel passage. In doing so, Mark makes it clear that we do not know when the end-times will come and it is absurd and even blasphemous to predict when the world will

cease to be – blasphemous because Jesus himself tells us in other gospels that even he does not know when the hour of the judgment of humanity will occur. As we all know, Advent is also about preparing for the coming of Christ at Christmas, but that theme will have to wait a week or two.

This week the readings focus our attention on the coming of Christ into our lives when we may least expect him – whether at the end or in the daily grind. The fact is that he is always on his way to us – he is never far from us. He visits us often. Like the whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*, he surprises us with his special presence on the occasions when we most need him. But he is always coming to us in ordinary and mundane ways too. Our lives as Christians can be exciting if we, like the servants in the gospel are watchful. But perhaps we don't watch for him so much but rather for some pleasure that we would like to indulge in or for some opportunity to settle a score or for way to keep from being bored. But when we watch for Jesus, we are never bored.

To be on watch for the Lord is to be ready to be a good neighbor, to be friendly and kind, to put ourselves in situations where we will meet the poor face to face, to be eager to visit the sick and the elderly, to be prepared to make sacrifices for our children who bear the special imprint of the one who is to come. To be on watch for the Lord is to have a ready smile and to extend a helping hand – knowing that it is Christ who experiences this smile and this help in the guise of the neighbor. To be on watch for the Lord is to be good to your spouse even when you don't feel like it because in your loving of her or him Christ is made really present in the sacrament of marriage. To be on watch for the Lord is to be alert when we receive the Holy Eucharist and when we digest the Holy Word of God.

The poor villagers in *The Power and the Glory* were well aware that they did not need the whiskey priest or any priest to experience Christ. Jesus was as close to them (and to us too) as the baby nursing or the woman next door on her sick bed. He was as close to them (and to us) as a prayer whispered in the heart. But these villagers were Catholics (as are we) – and we Catholics believe in the power and the grace of the sacraments. The priest for us is a reminder of Christ's love. The priest is a sacrament of Christ's presence. At the end of the novel after the whiskey priest has received martyrdom, the peasants all know what has happened to him and they begin to venerate him as a saint. In the final scene, a young boy in one of the villages hears a knock on the door in the middle of the night. When he fearfully unlatches the door, the man on the other side announces in a low voice that he is a priest. The martyred one has already (so soon!) been replaced. Christ has come again because Christ will never abandon us.

May we know the excitement of that boy during this Advent! May we have the faith of that boy as we prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas and every single day!