

The Flood Swept Everything Away

The flood comes without warning, unless you guess what is about to happen from the fact of Noah's ark-building enterprise. But that would, perhaps, ask too much of faith.

The Burglar

From this universal disaster Jesus turns to small-scale incidents: two men working in the fields, and one suddenly dies; two women doing housework, one is taken, and the other has to cope with the shock, the aftermath, the mourning. Then he gives us a sharp, extremely surprising image to think about: the burglar who comes at night. This is an incident which is of its nature surprising; no-one who is unsurprised needs to be burgled; if they are expecting it, they form a reception committee. But it happens, and Jesus tells us that "when the Son of Man comes" it will be like the arrival of a burglar. The thing about burglars is their complete indifference to the concerns of their victims. They act with impressive singleness of mind, unceremoniously entering by any route that appears to present itself, ignoring the conventions, not waiting for an invitation, not disturbing the house by ringing the doorbell, or greeting the family. Once inside, they have an agenda which involves the treasured possessions of the householder, but not the householder himself, who will be best if he stays asleep whilst the plan unfolds. Then, then all has been accomplished, and everything of value has been safely packed for transit, the burglar leaves as quietly as he came, and the dark hours tick on, until the waking victims open their eyes to their dispossession. *That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes.*

Well, Happy Advent, Anyway

The Gospel today hardly looks like the famous "preparation for Christmas" that we still expect from this first season of salvation. This is because we have forgotten the true meaning of Christmas as a time that revolutionizes the meaning of humanity, and especially bodily humanity. It is because of the body that we are vulnerable to the "one taken, one left" scenario, and that our dwelling-place is vulnerable to burglary. The same transience frames this beginning of a new year of grace, marking as it does another milestone in our passage to God. One day God will "sound forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat", and it will be by that divine mandate, not by the fulfillment of any human plans, that the world's story will be declared complete. The Day of the

Lord will not wait for me to finish the plans I have been making, or bring my work to its perfection. Rather, it will nip my plans in the bud, burglar-like.

God's Message For Advent

A priest's responsibility is to speak the Word of God; so what is the Lord saying to us on this Advent Sunday? It seems to be pitched somewhere between "Stay awake" and "Stand ready". What does he mean? Well, he isn't selling insurance, or telling us to become prudent in earthly terms. This readiness is a readiness for heaven, for the values of the kingdom (the one that is like a burglar). We have been taught what its advent is like: inexorable, guaranteed, not of this world; it is given to the poor, accessible only to those who somehow deserve to be considered as children, disguisedly present in our midst in the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick, the gentle. It all sounds eminently ignorable in a hard-nosed Christmas-shopping world. But be careful: one Day you will wake up, and that Kingdom may have made off with all your possessions, in which you put so much trust.

I have sent off in your name £400 to the flood victims of Bangladesh, and £2,000 to the relief of the people of Central America. Thanks be to God for so much generosity and hard work! So much less for the burglar to take. Fr Philip