

I had a dream this past week – Deacon Rich, our Administrator Noelle and I were all to be shot to death by Communists for our faith. But the Communists said, “We’d like to be neighborly about this – so we’ll grant you each 1 last request.” Noelle immediately piped up and said that she would like a great steak and fine bottle of Malbec. Deacon Rich and I both stared at her – I said “How can you think of food at a time like this?” (She IS Italian, you know). I said I’d like to deliver one final 3-point homily, trying to tie it all together to say something helpful to my flock before I die. And Deacon Rich said “I’d like to be shot before Fr. John’s homily!”

First some background on this gospel text. Luke describes the end in this way: “At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory....” When some of our younger parishioners hear the word ‘cloud’ they may well think of Amazon and Google and data storage. But in the bible a cloud is a mysterious image, and it is INTENDED to be mysterious. Clouds are the biblical symbol of mystery and of the presence of God. “He is coming with the clouds,” says Revelation 1:7. “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud,” said God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. A cloud symbolizing the divine presence covered the tent in the wilderness in Exodus (40:34-36). A cloud shrouded the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, a place where the presence of God dwelt according to Leviticus (16:2). And a cloud of glory, the very majesty of God, filled the temple of Solomon at its dedication in 1 Kings 8:10-11. And we have the cloud at the Transfiguration of Jesus, from which God spoke. (Lk 17:1-9) (from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2018, p. 53-54)

And with this background of great mystery, Christ reminds us that a day will come – and soon – when every stone of the temple would be toppled, leaving Jerusalem in a heap of rubble. That day came nearly 40 years later when the Romans surrounded Jerusalem, breached its walls, and leveled that magnificent edifice. But tucked into our lesson – if we listen carefully – is a promise brimming with expectant righteousness. “Stand up,” Jesus says, “because your redemption is at hand.” God’s word will triumph, and so we are to be expectant in hope, for God’s way is healing and His soul is love. (help from GRACEWORKS, 2 December 2018, p. 1-2)

Second, this portion of Luke’s Gospel is part of a larger apocalyptic discourse (Lk 21:5-38). Apocalyptic writing was popular in Jewish and Christian circles for a millennium or more. The focus is on eschatology – the end of the world as we now experience it and the beginning of a new world. Usually, the transition is described in terms of transformations that are cosmic in scope and nature. Judgment upon oppressive persons and institutions and the vindication of those made to suffer by such people and institutions are part of the apocalyptic agenda. Amid the painful and prolonged suffering, when no hope on the horizon can be seen, writers often employ the apocalyptic genre. They turn the faith of those who suffer toward the heavens – and by doing so, they offer a vision of the end of the present suffering and the beginning of the new age to come. So in the end, apocalyptic writing speaks a word of comfort.

So third, how do we claim our comfort, our hope, our assurance in the goodness of the future? Here we return to a primary Advent theme. We wait. But we wait with expectation – knowing that God will triumph in the end. But it is hard for us to do this. And Here’s why. We are always in a hurry! Haste is a way of life in our culture. Ask practically anyone how they are doing – man, woman or child – retired or working – and the answer is almost always the same: “I am so busy. I’m always behind. I can’t catch up.” Our hurry puts us under stress, raises our blood pressure, makes us impatient, renders us more vulnerable to accidents, and most seriously of all, blinds us to the needs of others. Haste is normally not a virtue, irrespective of the goodness of the thing towards which we are hurrying.

In 1970, Princeton University did some research with seminary students to determine whether being committed to helping others in fact made a real difference in a practical situation. They set up this scenario: They would interview a seminarian in an office and, as the interview was ending, ask that seminarian to immediately walk over to a designated classroom across the campus to give a talk. But they always put a tight timeline between when the interview ended and when the seminarian was supposed to appear in the classroom, forcing the seminarian to hurry. On the way to the talk, each seminarian encountered an actor playing a distressed person – akin to the Good Samaritan scene in the gospels. The test was to see whether or not the seminarian would stop and help. The results were not good.

One would guess that, being seminarians committed to a life of service, these individuals might be more likely to stop than most other people. But that wasn't the case. Being seminarians seemed to have no effect on their behavior in this situation. Only one thing did: They were prone to stop and help or to not stop and help mostly on the basis of whether they were in a hurry or not. If they were pressured for time, they didn't stop; if they were not pressured for time, they were more likely to stop.

From this experiment its authors drew several conclusions: First, that morality becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases; and second, that because of time pressures we tend not to see a given situation as a moral one. In essence, the more in a hurry we are, the less likely we are to stop and help someone in need. Haste and hurry, perhaps more than anything else, prevent us from being good Samaritans.

We know this from our own experience. Our struggle to give proper time to family, prayer, and helping others has mainly to do with time. We're invariably too busy, too pressured, too hurried, too driven, to stop and help. A writer confessed that when she comes to die what she will regret most about her life is not the times she broke a commandment, but the many times she stepped over her own children on her way to her office to write. Along similar lines, we tend to blame secular ideology for so much of the breakdown of the family in our society today when, in fact, perhaps the biggest strain of all on the family is the pressure that comes from the workplace that has us under constant pressure, forever in a hurry, and daily stepping over our children because of the pressures of work.

I know this in my own life. I am often feeling pressured, in a hurry, sometimes overextended, and then stepping over all kinds of things that call for my attention on my way from one thing to another. As a priest, I can rationalize this by pointing to the importance of the priestly ministry. Ministry is MEANT to conscript us beyond our own agenda, but deeper down, I know that much of this is a rationalization. Sometimes too I rationalize my busyness and hurry by taking consolation in the fact that I came to be this way legitimately. It's in my genes. Both my father and my mother exhibited a similar struggle. All 4 of my siblings too. They are wonderful, moral, and loving people, but they were often over-extended. Responding to too many demands is a mixed virtue.

It's no accident that virtually all classical spiritual writers, writing without the benefit of the Princeton study, warn about the dangers of overwork. Indeed, the dangers of haste and hurry are already written into the very first pages of scripture where God commands us to make sure to keep holy the Sabbath. When we are in a hurry we see little beyond our own agenda. Sabbath requires us to put work and business aside – and to focus on God, family, and rest.

The positive side to haste and hurry is that we always have a purpose. As well, haste and hurry can help make for a productive individual who is affirmed and admired for what they do, even as they are stepping over their children to get to the workplace. I get kudos for being in a lot of places, even as I have to admit that pressure and hurry prevent me much of the time from being a Good Samaritan.

Haste makes waste, so goes the saying. It also makes for a spiritual and a human blindness that can severely limit our compassion. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 2 Jun 2013) John Ortberg calls this fast-paced living 'hurry sickness,' and he says that it diminishes our capacity to love. And he tells of a favorite airline story. An elderly couple were flying first class, sitting behind a businessman who was enormously frustrated with them. They had been just ahead of him in line at the gate, and again boarding the plane, and they moved slowly, but he was in a hurry. When the meal was served, they delayed the businessman again by having to get some pills from the overhead storage, inadvertently dropping a battered duffel bag. "What's the matter with you people?" he exploded, loudly enough for the whole cabin to hear. "I'm amazed you ever get anywhere. Why can't you just stay home?"

To register his anger, the man sat down and reclined his seat back as hard as he could – so hard that the elderly husband's tray of food spilled all over him and his wife. The flight attendant apologized to the couple profusely: "Is there anything we can do?" she asked. The husband explained it was their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and they were flying for the first time in their lives and they were a little nervous. "Let me at least bring you a bottle of wine," the flight attendant offered. She did so. When it was uncorked, the old husband stood up, proposed a toast – and poured the bottle over the head of the impatient businessman sitting in front of them. And, so tells the pilot of the plane, everybody in the cabin cheered. (adapted from John Ortberg, *THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED*, p. 81-82)

So now we plunge headlong into the Advent season – or should we more honestly say, *THE CHRISTMAS SEASON* – how many already have put up the Christmas tree? (DON'T PUT YOUR HANDS UP!) It's the hurry season supreme! Fast-paced on steroids! We need to try to remember that we can pull back a bit – we don't need to bake every kind of cookie we always do – or put up as many decorations – or attend as many parties. We can say 'no thanks – I have another commitment tonight' – a commitment to spend some quiet time at home with a bit of prayer, a simple and relaxing meal with my family, and time to sit in front of the tree or Advent wreath and remember once again – God is in charge, not me. God will triumph, it's not all up to me. The world will go on – with or without me. And it is good that we are here. Very good indeed. Let the church say AMEN.