

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Advent
November 30, 2014

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It was at Thanksgiving time in 1955 I made my first visit to New York City. With apologies to The Big Apple, the biggest impression was the long-distance train ride from Chicago. For a ten year old boy with a Lionel “O gauge” layout in his basement, an overnight trip on *The 20th Century Limited* was big stuff.

Part of the fascination was with the Pullman car porter. He was in charge of the passengers in our sleeping car. Each roomette, stateroom, and drawing room had a button marked “porter.” You could push the button at any hour of the day or night. One or two minutes later the porter would quietly tap at your door. His “office” was a small compartment at the end of the car. That was where he shined shoes, ironed out the wrinkle in a skirt, and sewed on a button or two while waiting for some compartment number to once again light up his call board. The porter worked all night while tending to his passengers.

Some of you may have had similar experiences in the era when, as the Cunard Steamship Company put it, “*Getting there was half the fun.*” But I am not sharing my nostalgia because it is Thanksgiving weekend but because it is Advent Sunday. On Advent Sunday the Mass gospel gives us Our Lord’s memorable image of *watching while working*. It is similar to the job description of the Pullman car porter.

We are to *work* at those things Christ has given us to do while *watching* for His return. These are great themes of Advent. This season does not just prepare us for Christmas. The vision of the Holy Birth itself, and the Gospel preached by Christ, are given to whet our appetite in eager longing for His return when all will be fulfilled. The Lord Jesus showed all this to us in His analogy of the servant who is head of household.

In an oriental country, the head householder had a privileged position in the organizational chart of the estate or farm. He sometimes even ate at the family table and was treated as a family member. But he never forgot everything under his supervision belonged to the master and not to himself. There was never any confusion in this matter.

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When the master went away, the head householder was in charge. He went about assigning and overseeing the various tasks of the estate staff. But the most important thing to be done was *personal*. The head householder was to keep an eye on the path leading up to the door. When the master returned, he must have the door opened for him by the head householder. This was the sign that all is well.

No matter how involved the householder was in the complex working of the estate, he kept an eye on the door. His thoughts were of the master's return. The master, who put him in charge in the first place, expected this householder to be prepared to open the door at a moment's notice. Even at night, although the householder might doze off, part of him remained alert for the sound of steps. He was always prepared to jump up and greet his master.

All of the Lord's parables are given for our guidance and conduct as Christians in the world. Working at our tasks wholeheartedly, we keep in the back of our mind an awareness of the Lord, and that this temporary existence of ours may be supplanted at any time. As with the faithful householder, this moment is not to be dreaded but *longed for*. Working while watching is a great Advent theme and a great lifelong Christian theme.

There is more. The householder knows that his mandate in the master's absence is maintenance and, perhaps where needed, some improvement. Things break. They get messy. They need repair and clean up. A resourceful householder might even find ways to do things more efficiently in the master's absence. He is like the modern secretary who will tell you the office runs more efficiently when the boss is on vacation! But neither the office secretary or the oriental head householder has any brief for totally reorganizing the operation!

Finally, no matter how perfectly maintained and orderly the estate is there is always a huge deficiency: *the absence of the master*. In the meantime the estate may be improved, but it cannot be fulfilled. Its existence has one purpose only: to be the residence of the master. Even a totally dedicated householder cannot compensate for the master's absence. A house is not a home unless the owner is present and living in it.

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In Advent we are reminded that creation can be improved here and there by creative humanity inspired by the Holy Spirit. After all we are called by God to be co-creators. But to think creation's answer to its problems is improvement is to misdiagnose the situation. Creation's ultimate job is not improvement but *fulfillment*. Its goal is the full habitation of Jesus Christ, residing in every heart and soul, beginning with yours and mine. We work, we watch, and we wait. This is spiritual vigilance: knowing of, and longing for, the coming of Christ. It is Jesus Christ, and He alone, Who will make our world perfect.