

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Advent Sunday  
December 3, 2017

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Although some of you have heard the story, this morning's sermon began in a coffee hour conversation last week with Ed Finglas, our eminent train buff. My first long-distance train ride took place 62 years ago. And one of the many first-time experiences was meeting the Pullman car porter assigned to our sleeping car. Each roomette, stateroom, and drawing room had a button you could push 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 is 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 light up his call board. The porter worked all night while watching out for his passengers.

On Advent Sunday Our Lord Jesus gives us just such a 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 Advent themes. Advent is not a season preparing for the Birth of Christ. *The Lord has come*; we already have our marching orders. Our annual commemoration of the Holy Birth itself, and the Gospel preached by Christ, should whet our attitudes and appetites in eager longing for His return when all will be fulfilled. Jesus showed all this to us in His description of the servant who is head of the household.

In an oriental country the head householder has a privileged position in the organization of the estate or farm. He sometimes even eats at the family table and is treated as a family member. But he never forgets that everything under his supervision belongs to the master and not to himself. There is never any confusion in this matter!

When the master goes away the head householder is in charge. He goes about assigning and overseeing the various tasks of the household or estate staff as he has always done. But in the master's absence the most important thing to be done is *personal*. He is to keep an eye on the path leading up to the door. When he returns, the master must have his door opened for him by the head householder. This is a sign that all is well. No matter how involved the householder is in the complex working of the estate, *he keeps an eye on the door*. His thoughts are of the master's

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return. Even at night, although the householder may doze off, a part of him remains alert for the sound of steps. In a moment he may have to jump up to greet his master. It is very much like the Pullman car porter and his call board.

You can understand the implications for our conduct as Christ's disciples. Working at our tasks wholeheartedly, we keep in the back of our mind the awareness of the Lord. 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.

In the master's absence the head of household may even find ways to conduct the operation more efficiently. But no matter how perfectly maintained and orderly the estate is, there is always a huge deficiency. *It is the absence of the master*. The estate may be improved but it cannot be fulfilled. Its existence has one purpose only: to be the residence of the master. Nothing can compensate for the master's absence. A house is not a home unless the owner is present and living in it. No matter how efficient a Pullman car porter is at shining shoes and putting a press in trousers, if he has no passengers his sleeping car is left on the siding! It won't go to New York or any place else.

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