

2nd Sunday before Advent

Wantage

15th November 2020

Neil Gorsuch, an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, tells this story about one of his judicial heroes, Bryon White,

These days I sometimes find myself thinking back a quarter of a century to a day when, as a law clerk, I was walking with my boss, Justice Bryon White, along the ground-floor hallway of the Supreme Court. As we passed portrait after portrait of former justices, he asked me how many I could name. As much as I wanted to impress the boss, I admitted the answer was about half. The justice surprised me when he said, “Me too. We’ll all be forgotten soon enough.”¹

We’ll all be forgotten soon enough. Such thoughts about our own mortality and insignificance can lead us in one of two directions. One route is to imagine that nothing I do will be of any consequence. I might as well act how I want and do what I want – it will soon be forgotten. Another route, one that suggests a more positive path, is the recognition that we should live humbly, recognising that our actions are significant but our lives are not, ‘we’ll all be forgotten soon enough’.

The responsorial psalm appointed for today’s Mass reminds us that we are called to have an eternal perspective, God’s perspective. ‘A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday, which passes like a watch in the night’. So often we can be focused on our little worlds and blinded by our big egos that we forget

¹ N. Gorsuch, *A Republic, If You Can Keep It* (New York: Crown Forum, 2019), pp.15-16.

to step back and take in the broader horizon. Soon enough this pandemic, which feels so significant now, will be relegated to a footnote in a history book, if even that. This is not to fail to recognise the suffering currently experienced throughout the world today but to invite us to raise our eyes from the immediate to the eternal.

Alongside today's psalm our other readings from scripture articulate this need to live humbly with our focus on what endures. The prophet Zephaniah proclaims that 'neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them.' This enduring truth is particularly significant for our consumerist society with its emphasis on possessing more, beginning with money. St Paul entreats his readers to 'keep awake', 'encourag[ing] one another' with 'the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation'. St Matthew presents the parable of the talents, with its powerful and stark reminder that we will be accountable for the many gifts God has given to us. We are left pondering whether we have been good and trustworthy servants of the Lord. Each of these readings enjoins us to have before us the long view, to put our trust in that which endures and is eternal rather than that which is fleeting and fading.

Our forebears and ancestors were only too aware of the fragile nature of life and of how precious it is. Walk around any churchyard and examine the inscriptions upon gravestones and one immediately notices how young most people were when they died. A hundred years ago life expectancy was fifty-one years; when my fourth child is born next year he or she can reasonably expect to live into his or her eighties. The tremendous development in medicine and science are received thankfully but must not blind us to the fact that one day we will be called upon to give an account of our lives before the Lord. As the psalmist proclaims that 'the days of our life are three score years and ten, but they soon pass away and we are gone'.

Concluding his reflection about his former mentor Justice Neil Gorsuch reflected,

Justice White's portrait now hangs in the hallway with the others. Every time I walk by I see visitors standing before it wondering who he was. The truth is, Justice White was right and we are all forgotten soon enough. But with the passage of time I've come to see that this is exactly as it should be. In our conversation all those years ago, Justice White wasn't so much lamenting a loss as speaking a truth he warmly embraced. He knew that joy in life comes from something greater than satisfying our own needs and wants.²

Each of us will be asked by the Lord what we have lived for. Have we just sought to satisfy our immediate needs and wants or have received the precious gift of the Gospel and used it to further God's kingdom. What will answer be on that great and awful day when we stand before the Lord face to face?

² Ibid., p. 16.