St Mark

THE NEW SHOFAR

Whatever you possess must not possess you; whatever you own must be under the power of your soul; for if your soul is overpowered by the love of this world's goods, it will be totally at the mercy of its possessions." **St. Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.)**

THE IMPORTANCE OF WATCHFULNESS

Be on the alert writes St Peter, by which he means be vigilant, watchful, circumspect, be attentive to discover and avoid danger and do all you need to ensure your safety and those you love and care for. The Greek word means, more broadly, to arise, be aroused and sometimes even refrain from physical sleep so that you remain alert. The word also came to be used in the moral and religious sphere and was used to call for one to be on the alert, heedful of trouble or danger as others are sleeping or unsuspicious. We are to be watchful and ready to respond to external influences, focused, alert for the winds of temptation or overt attacks of evil. Most of the NT uses are in reference to the Christians' being spiritually awake and alert, as opposed to being spiritually indifferent and listless. It is like a sleeping man rousing himself. Christians need to be active, to take heed lest through remissness and indolence some destructive calamities suddenly overtake one. It has at times been used to describe people carefully crossing a river while stepping on slippery stones. If they did not pay strict attention to their steps, they would end up in the water.

Why was this urging of St Peter so strong?

Peter was writing in Rome around 62AD – 65AD, not a good time to be a Christian. In A.D. 64, a terrible fire broke out in Rome. It was strongly believed that Nero deliberately torched the city to justify building a more splendid one. At any rate, the conflagration raged out of control for more than a week, substantially destroying about 70% of the area. As a consequence of this tragedy, and the widespread belief in Nero's complicity, the emperor became the brunt of intense criticism.

We do not know for certain how or when the cause of Christ was planted in Rome but it could be that some from Rome, converted on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10), migrated back to their home city and established the church there. Regardless, this was the first real test of faith for the saints in the "eternal city."

The Neronian persecution was vicious indeed. Tacitus (c. A.D. 60-120), a Roman historian, has preserved a record of this situation. We quote the following from his *Annals* (XV.44). He writes in … *Accordingly, arrest was first made of those who confessed [to being Christians]; then, on their evidence, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as because of [their] hatred for the human race. Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clothed in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed*. Peter then had good reason for urging this sense of alertness. Lives, theirs and those of their fellow believers could be taken from them in the most brutal of ways, and there was no excuse for them to grow complacent. Theirs is a spiritual warfare.

Confidence in God must not lead to complacently

Furthermore, Peter chooses to use a form of the verb that speaks of an urgent, ongoing action, one that comes with a sense of finality and force (an aorist imperative). Note that a strong trust in God's power and watch care and a confidence that we can cast our anxiety on Him does not justify spiritual complacency on our part. In spiritual warfare we cannot take the approach to simply "*Let go and let God*!" It is **imperative** Peter says that we do not become indolent and lazy, taking God's grace for granted and letting down our guard or we will become victims of the enemy. The outside forces that come against us demand us to be alert and vigilant.

The **Shrike system** is excellent illustration of Peter's exhortation. The ancient sport of falconry used trained hawks or falcons in the pursuit of wild game. When the "predator" was allowed to fly, however, it often rose too high for human eyes to see it. For this reason, a hunter often carried a small, caged bird called a Shrike. By watching the antics of the little bird, the man could always tell where his hawk was, for the shrike instinctively feared the predator and cocked its head to keep it in view.

We desperately need the alert perception of the shrike when it comes to detecting our spiritual enemy...We are to be always on the alert. It would be nice if God had giant sirens to warn us of an attack by the devil. But the Lord does not operate that way. *Being alert* requires us to be regular readers of the Bible, meditating on its Truths, maintain a prayerful attitude throughout the day, engaging with fellow believers in our faith community and doing all we need to be filled with the Spirit. Only then will we be sensitive to an imminent onslaught of the evil one and be armed by grace to meet it.

And who is this ferocious enemy

St Peter answers that for us as well… *Be sober and vigilant. Your adversary the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*. The word for "adversary" carries with it the sense of a plaintiff or accuser in a trial before a judge while the word for "devour," has the sense of *to gulp down or swallow, implying a complete destruction*. It is probable, that the special form of attack of which the Apostle thought was that of the persecution by Nero that was then raging and which, though human agents were prominent in it, Satan was regarded as the real instigator.

Despite the widespread scepticism of our contemporary West, the devil is a great deal more than a pop-culture trope. The Scriptures warn us about thinking of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea, as this mistake would lead us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable.

Nor should we relegate the devil to antiquity. *Be alert*, the scriptures warn us, the devil exists! Even in the 21st century. And we must not be naïve. We must learn from the Gospel how to battle against him, and evidence of the devil's existence is not all that difficult to spot. All around us there are signs. Where there is evil the devil is acting. We see this in acts such as hatred, temptation, racism, violence of all kinds, false promises, division, gossip, war, corruption, isolation, pessimism, despair, hypocrisy and even the so-called religious wars. But his power is by no means absolute. It was smashed by Christ on the cross and the only reason he succeeds is because we prefer what the Evil One has on offer, that moment of pride, arrogance, selfishness or Adam and Eve's favourite – hubris.