

Vision and Balance

November begins with All Saints and, the next day, All Souls, and our year wraps up with Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. November always forces us as a Church, liturgically, to focus on what is most essential. Today's readings, in a certain way, speak about what is most essential in terms of vision and balance. As I was thinking about how to talk about vision and balance, my mind went back to stand-up paddleboarding. How many of you have ever been on a standup paddleboard? A fair number of you.

The kind of standup paddleboarding I do—one of my hobbies—is in rougher water. Most of my paddling is out in the Puget Sound on my day off. When I began, I took a lesson. I was taught three essentials for keeping your balance and staying out of the water, and they fit today's readings. First: keep your eyes fixed on the horizon. Look down, you're going in; look back, you're going in. Keep your vision level. Second: keep paddling. My instructor, when he saw me about to go down, would yell, "Paddle, paddle, paddle!"—you need to keep going, to persevere, to keep moving. If you stop, the next wave will take you in. Third—surprisingly—I had forgotten this and needed a refresher: don't grip the paddle too hard. If you grip hard, you get rigid; and if you're rigid instead of loose, you're going in. That's how you stay balanced.

Applied to our readings, it fits. Start with vision: keep your gaze in the right place, especially when it's choppy. If you watch the waves, you're going in. Keep your eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus.

Four Wrong Focuses

There are four areas of focus St. Paul and the Lord name that will throw us off balance. First, "minding the business of others": we get wrapped up in other people's lives—think Instagram, YouTube—then we fixate on the faults of others, making the problem "this sinner" rather than our own hearts; and related to that, we compare ourselves with others. Paul warns that this is the wrong focus; you'll go in if you keep looking there.

Second, staring at "the externals of the Church": the sins of the institutional Church, the person next to me I don't like, falsified piety. Spending too much time looking at that is not the right focus.

Third, the big, scary events outside our control: wars, famines, insurrections—nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom. Be aware so you can pray, but don't fixate on them as signs; that focus will pull you off course.

Fourth, false messiahs. The Gospel warns, "I am he—the time is here"—don't listen. I'm not talking about someone literally claiming to be Jesus; I mean the cultural substitutions:

a secular “messianism” (Catechism 675)—anything we treat as savior other than Jesus: politics, technology, ideology, idolatry. Focus there and you’re going in.

Loosen Your Grip: Humility, Perseverance, and Testimony

Now, the right vision and direction is the Lord Jesus—but many of us still get off balance. After my first year of paddleboarding I was falling in constantly. A quick lesson fixed it in two minutes: “Stop gripping the paddle so hard.” I loosened my grip and my balance returned. In the first reading, the prophet Malachi contrasts those who fear (that is, trust) the Lord with the proud. Pride is control, self-sufficiency—gripping the paddle too hard. To move into a proper relationship with the Lord, we have to put ego, pride, and self-sufficiency to death. If you grip too hard, you lose your suppleness; you stop going with the flow; you stop surrendering.

So how do we keep paddling—how do we persevere? First, persist. Each morning: “Good morning, Lord. I want You to be Lord today; I don’t want me to be Lord today. I want to follow and listen, as imperfectly as I do.” Second, trust the promise: “Do not prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself will give you wisdom in speaking that none can resist or refute.” That’s dependence on the Lord—holy interdependence. Third, it leads to testimony. Testimony isn’t complicated; if we live in communion with Jesus, His love is made known through us—people can see Jesus in us, even if they can’t name Him yet.

Dear friends in Christ, as we approach the final Sunday of Ordinary Time and prepare for Advent, the Church urges us to stay with the basics: keep your balance and keep your eyes on Jesus. May we be found looking at Him, our Savior and Redeemer.

Praise be Jesus Christ.