

SAINTS ALIVE!

Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 23rd 2007

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FROM THE DESK OF THE RECTOR

Dear Parishioner

One Advent Hymn, at verse three, contains these words – ‘Born thy people to deliver; Born a Child and yet a King; Born to reign in us forever; Now thy gracious kingdom bring.’ This verse, like many other verses in different places, presents a summary of the story of Christmas. We know that many people have not made this kind of connection. For them, the season is about ‘Christmas things’ - lights, music, gifts, parties, family fellowship and so on. But, among Christian people, there should be a consistent effort to keep the deeper meaning of Christmas visible and understood.

We have previously noted that a proper understanding of Christmas does not emphasise a strict historical perspective, but a theological one. That is, God is working his purpose out and the people of God discern what God is doing and celebrate it.

At Christmas, God crossed over to humanity in a far reaching communication of love which, with its great promise for all people, has changed the world. So Christmas is about God and



His mighty acts of love for and on behalf of His people. And that is good news and cause for celebration.

However, there is a growing trend, in this third millennium, for humans to assume creator status in a more presumptuous way. Not that this is a new trend, it is that it seems now to be a demand, a right, a privilege. Archbishop Rowan Williams (Cantaur) suggests that God would be ashamed ‘to be the God of people who behave and speak as if they didn’t really need God, as if they didn’t really need grace and hope and forgiveness.’

The real challenge is the apparent upsurge in this kind of behaviour in the church. Is the human sexuality debate, which is splitting up the Communion, a manifestation of this creator-like behaviour? Archbishop Williams (Cantaur) in his Advent message, talks about our recognition of each other in one fellowship, when we see another ‘standing under’ the word of Scripture. And among other things, scripture calls us to faith, worship, repentance,

humility, discernment and belief. I like the use of the term ‘recognition’ because a lack of recognition, even in simple things, can create problems of major proportions. Is this lack of recognition responsible for this assumption of creator-status by God’s most intelligent creatures? Is there something of an overthrow showing itself in the break up of the communion?

Rev. Donald J. Curran, Rector of Grace Episcopal Church (one of the congregations which has voted to leave the Diocese of Central Florida and the Episcopal Church) suggests that the human sexuality issues are a manifestation of a larger problem. As Rev. Curran sees it, the Church (Episcopal) ‘is moving away from orthodox faith and the Gospel.’ Is Rev. Curran right? Is the church moving away from the gospel? What are your thoughts?

Whatever they are, let us be reminded that Christmas covers all the issues before us – the break up of the Communion, issues of human sexuality, poverty, HIV and AIDS, self determination, climate change, crime and violence, disease and much more. And that is what the hymn is seeking to convey to us - that Jesus, who was

TO LOVE GOD AND TO USE HIS GIFTS TO HIS GLORY

born one Christmas long ago, has brought deliverance to us and more, if we allow him to reign in us. It is for us to discern, recognise and participate in what God is doing in His world. Foremost in this process is giving love and doing all things to the greater glory of God.

Permit me here in wishing Christmas greetings to everyone, to thank all persons for their love and grace, resistance with commitment and honesty with responsibility, for what we have tried to do in fulfilling the mission of God at All Saints' with the Chapel of Ease during this calendar year.

May God bless you this Christmas and always.

Yours in Christ
Claude Berkley (Rev'd Canon)

You can read the full text of the Advent and Christmas messages of +Rowan (Cantaur), referred to by Canon Berkley, at www.anglicancommunion.org/acn

BETHLEHEM REFLECTION: 'NO WAY TO THE INN' - WAITING FOR THE LIGHT **from Social Justice Commission of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia**

If the Christmas story were to happen today, Mary and Joseph would have a hard time getting to Bethlehem, as a high concrete wall built by the Israelis, lies in the way. In the photo, a Palestinian woman in Bethlehem passes a painting on the wall, depicting a dove of peace wearing a flak jacket.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned." Is 9:2

How does one describe "darkness?" Darkness can be a metaphor for the most difficult and hopeless experiences of one's life. Darkness can describe personal tragedies and traumas, but it can also describe the experiences of peoples and nations. Darkness is the place where hope is hard to find. It is the place where doubt seems to overwhelm us, where we question our own convictions and question the promises of others.

During Advent, many churches reflect upon life without hope. The scripture readings take us back to the nativity story and the hope that it offers to all peoples. However, today, the land of Palestine again lives under occupation. Darkness in this "holy place" is stifling. Almost all families within both the Israeli and Palestinian communities are grieving the death of family members who have died by violence. The Israelis rejoice in a country that they can call their own, one that they can govern, but their memories of racial hatred continue to haunt them. The Palestinians find little to rejoice about, having lost so much of their land, their economic base and their way of life. Their



hopelessness is exacerbated by threats of home demolitions, of the military invading their homes without warning, of unreasonable arrests, detentions, and beatings of adults and young boys. It is also exacerbated by a world that seems to have lost sight of them.

Isaiah said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." How long do people need to live in darkness before light comes? How long do you grieve the loss of loved ones through needless violence? How many people abandon any hope that the light will dawn upon them? How many generations pass away before the birth of this "light?"

When light comes, it most often breaks in gently, and is recognised only by a few people. In the West Bank today, we see signs of this light beginning to dawn. Many Palestinians, when asked what gives them hope, will answer the birth of a child. We see hope in the conviction of some Israelis and Palestinians that the conflict can only be resolved through non-violence. Just as in the Nativity story, the powers of darkness will do their best to put out the light. The construction of the separation wall drives this land into an even deeper darkness. Pray for God's light to break down the barriers to peace and hope, in Bethlehem and throughout God's world.

ADVENT AND THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

One of the biggest challenges we face in life is to live by the spirit of the Law, stripped of the traditions made and perpetuated by us, but which are not scriptural. These traditions in our modern lives may be likened to those of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus.

In order to protect the simple 'Law' as given by Moses, and to protect themselves from breaking that Law, the Pharisees, in particular, devised a set of man-made laws which had to be observed. These laws were like a wall around the true Law.ⁱ Breaking these laws was not as serious as actually breaking God's Law. However, elaborating on the Law had the effect of alienating the Jews from the true spirit of the Law. This caused them to see ethical concerns in a very polarised manner, thereby 'watering down' the true spirit of the Law.

In the Sermon on the Mount, so often confusing in its apparent contradictions, Jesus sets out to elucidate the meaning of the true Law. This is



far more stringent than the Pharisaic traditions, which had almost become more important to the Pharisees than the revealed Law of Moses. Jesus' sermon, in the context of the times, was a counter argument to the ideas and practices of the Pharisees,

and what He saw as their alienation from God.

In the season of Advent, when we prepare ourselves for the birth of Christ, our Saviour, we seek not to be alienated from God, but to be ever more reconciled and close to Him; to be more Christ-like. Nevertheless, it is so easy to fall into the trap of hard heartedness against those less fortunate than ourselves and refuse to help them or interact with them because their moral values or work ethics do not agree with ours.

I am sure many, if not all of us, have, on occasions, refused to give beggars and vagrants, for example, the dollar (or even lunch) they demand



because we feel they might spend it on drugs, and anyway, we feel they should be working for a living, just as we are. In Luke 5:32, Jesus reminds us that He has not come 'to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'.

Difficult though it may be, and despite all the arguments we are fed to the contrary, are these not some of the many that we are called to assist, and who are we to refuse assistance? Giving a dollar or even lunch might not be a sustainable kind of assistance; a mere plaster on a wound too deep to be covered by such a flimsy thing. And yet the plaster

might be the beginning of something greater, something more enduring. It might lead a soul to Christ. If we exclude from our fellowship and worship those Christ came to save, those who are different from us, what is our Church about?

Advent demands that we act from within, from our deepest faith. The Advent wreath, with all its symbolism, directs us to live through hope, love, joy and peace, in a never ending cycle of renewal and growth. This is the moment that we need to grasp, in our New Year, as the foundation for our dealings not only with our fellow worshippers, but also with those to whom we should evangelise in a real, meaningful way – even though, or perhaps because, this will require sacrifice on our part.

The candles of hope, love and joy have already been lit; we look forward to the peace to come and the celebration, on Tuesday, of Christ's birth, when the white Christ candle will



brightly shine. Let us enjoy this momentous occasion, and share our joy with all who need it, letting the faith from within guide us.

SAINTS ALIVE! thanks Kate Wong for yet another thought-provoking and deeply challenging article.

ⁱ Refer to <http://letusreason.org> – the 'Let us Reason Ministries'

THE SIMPLE JOYS OF CHRISTMAS

Last night I was invited to an informal party at my neighbour's home. The family is musically talented, with a mother who sings, and children who play the clarinet, harp and recorder. They have friends who sing like angels and make wonderful music. It was a fabulous experience, with everyone's children playing downstairs in the spacious yard, together with some of the younger people liming at tables under the stars whilst parents and friends limed on the gallery, near the creche. lit by Christmas lights.

Food was prepared by the young ladies of the family and their friends; a sumptuous repast of exciting salads and roast chicken. Unlike many Christmas parties, we were spared the loud, commercial music. Instead we were regaled with

duets from two of the young ladies who competed in the Eisteddfod (Music Festival) in Wales this year, including carols and parang accompanied by the harp and the guitar. The children put on a narrated performance of the nativity, costumes and all, including a charming performance of the donkey carrying Mary with delightful, innocent joy. Love abounded at this gathering which included neighbours, family and friends, and brought together people of all walks of life in a joyful celebration.

For me, these are the simple joys of Christmas which reflect the spirit of the season, with all its significance. A happy and Holy Christmas to all. Kate

THE GOLDEN COMPASS – continued from page 6

'The first ghost to leave the world of the dead was Roger. He took a step forward, and turned to look back at Lyra, and laughed in surprise as he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air ... and then he was gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will was reminded of the bubbles in a glass of champagne'. There is nothing in this portrayal of Nirvana to give a child nightmares about dissolving into nothingness, but it is not Christian teaching.

'I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting'. We need to understand what we mean by those lines in the Apostle's creed, and why. If we have shared this faith with our children then they can only benefit from Pullman's books. The lesson that not every idea in a book is necessarily right is one they need to learn, and these three books are also full of depictions of loyalty, courage and caring and sacrificial love.

See the film - it is well done and anything that encourages a child to read is worth pursuing. Get hold of the books and read them yourself first or read them with your child. (After all, they are in the public domain and if your child is curious about them he or she will read them sooner or later anyway.) Then you can use this shared reading to start a discussion about what examples are worth trying to follow and what aspects of the world here and hereafter we and Philip Pullman see differently.

SAINTS ALIVE! is truly grateful to Roberta White for this thoughtful and valuable insight into the apparently controversial film, 'The Golden Compass'.

HUMOUR!

The Priest was pre-occupied with how he would ask his parishioners to give more money to the Church's repair fund. Only at the last moment did he realise the regular organist was missing and a volunteer was in place.

He told the new organist to think of something appropriate to play after the announcement about funds for the repairs.

'Brothers and Sisters, we are in great difficulty. The repairs will cost \$50,000 more than we expected. Will all parishioners who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand.'

The organist promptly played the first few bars of the National Anthem. Problem solved!

ON NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

Between Christmas and Old Year's, we will suddenly realise that 2007, which began only a short time ago, is now almost over; the speed at which time passes is obviously faster than it was when we were young. Einstein probably had a theory about that! And, knowingly or otherwise, our thinking will be influenced by Ecclesiastes 3:1 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven', for we know it is, once again, the season and the time for making resolutions.

We will try to excuse ourselves – what's the point?



Been there, done that! Those we made last year, and the year before and before still await our attention, so why do it again?

Is there, indeed, any point in making New Year Resolutions? For most of us, 2007 has not been an easy year and already 2008 looks like 'same old, same old ...', or worse, with no end in sight to the mayhem, murder and madness which torture and seem to be dehumanising us.

Resolutions help us to clarify our thinking, to establish our priorities, to decide what is really important to us. This, then, enables us to maximise the use of our time, talent and treasure – those gifts God gave us and which He expects us to put to productive use. But, as always, He helps us. Consider how these important 'en-words', representing aspects our personality, can help and

empower us – our energy, enthusiasm, endurance and enterprise, our ability to encourage, engage, enjoy and enlighten.

In light of this, let us reconsider the troublesome matter of Resolutions!

The Rev'd Walter Schoedel, a Lutheran Minister from Missouri, listed his '7-Ups for the New Year'. If we follow them, they will make a real difference in our own lives and the lives of those with whom we are in contact. If everyone in T&T followed suit..... Well, you can work that out!

1. **WAKE UP** - Begin the day with God. It is His day. Rejoice in it.
2. **DRESS-UP** - Put on a smile. It improves your looks. It says something about your attitude.
3. **SHUT-UP** - Watch your tongue. Don't gossip. Say nice things. Learn to listen.
4. **STAND-UP** - Take a stand for what you believe. Resist evil. Do good.
5. **LOOK-UP** - Open your eyes to the Lord. He is your only Saviour.
6. **REACH-UP** - Spend time in prayer with your adorations, confessions, thanksgivings and supplications to the Lord.
7. **LIFT-UP** - Be available to help those in need - serving, supporting, and sharing.

Our Gospel reading for next Sunday, the first after Christmas, will be John 1:1-18 – 'the great prologue'. Verses 4-5 read 'What has come into

being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' This idea is taken further in the Collect, in which we pray God to 'grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives.'

This, surely, is an invitation to use our own light, (which we could interpret as our time, talent and treasure, supported by those '7-Ups' and the empowering 'en-words'), in our own ways, to bring light to the darkness we are experiencing in our nation – the darkness of inequity, injustice, intolerance, which are exacerbated by our lack of compassion and our uncaring, thoughtless behaviour. This darkness is manifested in many inter-related ways, including poverty, racism, the drug trade, discrimination, environmental degradation, rampant crime, selfish and dangerous driving, soaring food prices and the abuse of children, persons with disabilities, AIDS, women, the elderly – a catalogue of horrors.

Perhaps we feel we are not part of all that – we are just the victims. But is that really so, or are we too complacent? And, we must not forget that, as Church, we have a mission. Think about it! Would it help if we used this time, this season, for the purpose of resolving to shine our own light, wherever we are able, to lighten just one area of the darkness which shrouds our land? There is only one way to find the answer to that! Let's do it!! All of us!!

STEERING BY THE GOLDEN COMPASS

By the time this appears in print "The Golden Compass" will have finished its run at the Globe but is likely to be still available at Kaydonna and Movietowne. This holiday-release children's film has caused a wave of holy hysteria: parents are being advised not to let their children see it because it could encourage them to read the book on which it is based and the two sequels. The film, were are told, has been dumbed-down to appear innocuous but the books are all anti-church. The author, Philip Pullman, is an avowed atheist and in the third book there is even a scene in which characters representing Adam and Eve kill God.

But your children will want to see the film, so what do you do?

The first thing to note is that the accusation about killing God is simply not true. Anyone who makes it has obviously not bothered to read the books themselves. If they had they would have found out that:

1. It wasn't God, but an elderly and senile angel
2. They didn't intend him harm: he disintegrated while they were trying to help him.

However, a parent whose child reads the book of "The Golden Compass" after seeing the film will have to cope with a far more immediate emotional crisis than the death of God. The story is about a girl called Lyra who rescues her friend Roger from a sinister group known to the children as the Gobblers, and the film ends with Lyra and Roger setting out on a further quest to save Lyra's father who is in danger from the Gobblers' parent body, the Magisterium.

So far as it goes, the film stays reasonably close to the book. But the book contains three further dire chapters in which Lyra's father callously murders Roger in order to use the psychic energy thus released to blast a gateway into another world. This will come as a bitter shock to a child who was looking forward to the further adventures of Lyra and Roger, and if your young reader is not to be put off the printed word you may have to encourage him or her to go on to the other two books and follow Lyra through to the resolution of the struggle.

So what exactly will you be letting your child in for, and are the books as evil as claimed?

It is true that the books are anti-church, or rather, against dogmatic religion of any description. 'All the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity', says a character in the third book. 'The rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed'. That may be Philip Pullman's view of the church but is not true of Anglicanism, and I would hope our children have enough sense to see that, just because the Magisterium is also called 'the church' (in the books, though not in the film) that doesn't mean that what he says about the Magisterium necessarily applies to All Saints. Indeed, Christ is not mentioned at all and nor is Christianity, it is a very hollow shell of a church that is being attacked in the books.

Lyra's world is one in which the spirits of humans have a separate physical existence called a daemon. This takes the form of an animal which stays close to the living person and fades away (or in the film, vanishes in a golden swirl) when the person dies. We have daemons too, the books say, except that ours are internal. In Book 2, a man from our world who ended up in Lyra's says 'In this world I saw my daemon for the first time. Can you imagine my astonishment at learning that part of my own nature was female, and bird-formed, and beautiful?'

As well as body and daemon there is a third part (ghost, or soul) that, according to these books, goes on to the world of the dead. 'It's a place of nothing', says a ghost in Book 3. 'The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom for ever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep or rest or peace'. Lyra and a new friend, Will, visit that world and cut a doorway to enable the ghosts to escape, although Lyra warns them (having discovered this from her golden compass) that, on leaving the world of the dead, they will disintegrate just as the body and spirit have.

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