

Sermon preached by The Rev'd Glenn Maytum

29 December 2019

The First Sunday after Christmas

I love Advent! I love the words, the images that are developed, the ideas of WAITING and ANTICIPATION; the colours: violet, rose and white; the Advent carols: "Lo He comes with clouds descending" is my favourite.

The dual meanings: the birth of a baby/the return of Christ.

But, there are strange things for us in the Southern Hemisphere:

Green holly when everything goes drought brown; Carols and cards depicting snow when it is 40 degrees (Celsius!); "Scattering darkness" when we have Daylight Saving.

Only after my first Christmassy trip to England did I really understand these images.

Fancy having a Candlelit Carols service in Westminster Abbey at 4pm!! 4pm??

Well, when it's sunset at 3.52pm and they turn off the lights in the Abbey at 4pm sharp and you are in darkness... So THAT'S the reason for the candles!

And, there are those interesting descriptive titles: *O Sapientia*- Wisdom, *O Oriens*- Dayspring, *O Emanuel*- God With Us.

So, back in Australia as I wandered (lonely as a shopper) in the local Shopping Centre, I found myself being bombarded by two different songs:

The first was "God is watching us, from a distance". And, I discovered it has a Christmas version, viz:

"God is watching us/ God is watching us, from a distance. O come let us adore him/ O come let us adore him. Joy to the world."

Well, for me, apart from "mixing their metaphors" (as it were), there is some irony here.

One of the special titles is Emanuel God-with-us.

The whole idea of Christmas is that God is NOT away, watching us "from a distance" but, that instead, as we read at Christmas "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us".

Or, as Father John in his Christmas sermon quoted Eugene Petersen as saying: "Jesus has moved into our neighbourhood".

I found this to be a very profound statement.

And, as our psalm today indicates, the response to this is, in fact, part of that Christmas version: we are CAUSED to praise God! "O come let us adore Him" is the correct response!

And, there was a second song. They played, repeatedly, "The Twelve Days of Christmas".

So, here is another Southern Hemisphere phenomenon. This song is being used to count down the days TO Christmas. Another ironic touch, as the song is NOT actually about the days BEFORE Christmas, but the days extending from the EVE of Christmas until the Epiphany- the days OF Christmas.

If we were in France, or Italy or Greece, rather than finding hot cross buns in the shops at the moment, we would be enjoying a further anticipation.

Epiphany for us falls in the middle of the holiday season when businesses close, people holiday or go to the beach.

But, in France, my friends see Epiphany as important as Christmas. It is a public holiday (a holy day); a special cake *Galette des Rois* (Cake of the Kings), is baked, where a little king made out of porcelain is put inside the cake; children pull bon-bons to reveal paper crowns to wear (representing the kings from the East); gifts are given.

Seems a bit like what we've just been doing, this week?

The song, itself, was composed in the time of the Protestant Reformation, where the idea was to keep the Old Faith alive, especially with children. The important tenets of the Faith were disguised with symbols, the way we often teach important things to children.

Remember- On the first day of Christmas, my true love (God- the object of our love) gave to me:

A partridge (a "clean" calling bird) in a pear tree (the symbol of the tree of life).

On the Second- two turtledoves: The Old and the New Testaments;

Three French hens: the gifts of the Wise Men to Jesus- Gold, incense, myrrh;

Four calling birds: Telling out- The Four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John;

Five Gold Rings: The Law, The Pentateuch- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy;

Six Geese-a-laying: The six days of creation;

Seven Swans-a-swimming: The Seven Original Sacraments;

Eight Maids-a-milking: The Beatitudes. The blessings found in Matt 5:3-11;

Nine Ladies Dancing: The fruits of the Holy Spirit. I won't list them because we see them every time we come to communion at St James', in the floor mosaic tiles on the first step;

Ten Lords-a-leaping: The Ten Commandments;

Eleven Pipers piping: The eleven faithful Apostles (sans Matthias);

Twelve Drummers drumming: The twelve points of principle we recite each week in the Creed, starting with "We believe in One God..."

This weekend puts us about one-third of the way through the song. We know the story, but we anticipate the events around the Epiphany, anyway.

We know from today's Reading that the arrival of the men from the East caused an over-reaction from Herod, jealous of his own self-importance. This led to a very dark day for the little village of Bethlehem.

Yet, today's news on television or the radio or in the newspapers can reveal to us stories of political instability, fighting and cruelty, suffering of innocent people, religious discontent, ideological trumpeting of various leaders. Still a dark day for many, here and abroad.

According to the song we are counting down to the Epiphany where there is a bright and clear light. What we were waiting for during Advent has been made truly human and revealed to all people.

In his *circular message* the Rector exhorts us to continue being faithful to our calling of serving Christ in the City of Sydney- our neighbourhood.

So, May the Light of the Incarnate Word bless our Twelve Days as we meet Jesus in the people of our neighbourhood, this Christmas and Epiphany season.