

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Fourth Sunday of Advent

22 December 2019

“To come to the place where we began...”

Readings: Isaiah 7: 10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19;
 Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-25.

Childhood Christmas

For me, what is known as the secular ‘Christmas Season’ (including Advent) usually brings back memories of what Christmas was like when I was young. As is the case for most children, it was a time of joy and mystery coupled with stress and chaos.

It was certainly a time of presents and family gatherings – such as my older brothers returning from various parts of the country, often with a few friends in tow. There was the fun of decorating the freshly cut Christmas tree and house. There were also many visitors, parties and moments of good humour.

There was also heat, humidity and the threat of bushfires – as it is today, but perhaps not as catastrophic! I remember travelling in the hot and stuffy EH Holden with perspiration rolling down our backs causing us to stick to the seats - the only relief came from having all the windows down. Yet we remained ever hopeful of the arrival of a southerly buster to bring a cool change with likely rain to refresh the drying grass.

My mother took us shopping. There would be crowds of people tramping down the pavement in the searing heat. Crying children were dragged along by a determined mother trying to get this job done and get home. But then, in compensation, we would enter a department store and luxuriate in the relief of the air-conditioned and perfumed sanctity of a temple of Mammon.

The Advent Journey

Such was the preparations for Christmas in those days, and I suspect that little has changed today. I realise now that, in their own way, these were advent experiences. They were times to ‘get ready’ for a ‘big event’, and times of expectation of something special to come. We therefore put up with the inconveniences and costs so that we might have a moment of joy coupled with a little bit of mystery concerning the human condition.

Anyone who has prepared for a special event will know the cost involved in such preparation. I think especially of athletes preparing for the Olympic Games, or students preparing for the Higher School Certificate, or businesspeople preparing for a new commercial venture. No pain no gain they say!

There are many advents in this world. As the Bible describes, there was a long advent from the creation of the world and the emergence of the first humans to the coming of the Christ in the person of Jesus. What we Christians call the 'Old Testament' (but that may be more accurately called the Hebrew Scriptures) is for us an advent story.

These ancient histories are not without pain, failure, hardship and grief; but they are also not without joy and pleasure. The ancient Hebrews, as the story goes, were nomads who ended up as slaves in Egypt. God acted to release them from slavery and lead them to a land of promise. They fought with those around them and they fought with each other, but eventually settled and created a kingdom, but such greatness was short-lived. They were conquered, lost everything and exiled, only to be restored again, and then conquered again.

On a spiritual plane, these wanderings of God's people were a preparation for and ultimate enlightenment and wonderment that was to be discovered despite the dead-ends, defiles and disasters of the feeble human condition that we call sin and brokenness.

"Turn back to God!" exhorted John the Baptist in preparation for the coming Messiah. And why? Because God desires to be at the centre of the lives of his people. And we continue in this ancient advent journey today because God affirms his presence among us through love.

How Should we Live?

Christmas can never be separated from Easter. The advent of the Kingdom of God came through the death of Jesus. To show us the way to the fullness of life, Jesus was born as one of us, he lived as one of us, and he died as one of us; but it was resurrection that quietly ushered in a new world order that remains with us today.

Today we come near to the end of our Advent wanderings for this year and are poised to enter the celebration of God's coming to live in humanity. For Christians, this event changed how we understand ourselves and the world around us. That is, we learnt that just as the Spirit of God resided in Jesus, so too the Spirit of God resides in us and those around us. The Spirit of God therefore resides in all: the refugee, the prisoner and free, the poor and rich, those with disabilities and those without, and so on and so forth.

But there is more! We have come to learn that the Spirit of God also transcends ethnic and national identities, transcends tribe and class, and transcends religious institutions. This understanding is not meant to be merely a cute idea. God's presence in humanity is an act of grace, which is meant to be transforming not only of ourselves but also of our communal life – reflecting what we often seek in peace and justice.

It is for this reason that Christians are concerned for the well-being of the poor and marginalised, are concerned for the integrity and protection of the natural world and are concerned for the fair treatment of all people regardless of age, race, sexual orientation or religion. Conversely, Christians who are principally interested in defending their power, privilege and vested interests betray the gospel of grace.

Christmas reveals to us that 'God is with us'; present here in humanity; present here in word and sacrament; present here in an ongoing incarnation. In response, we seek to recognise the presence of Christ in every person and respect them accordingly – which is a matter of both morality and faith.

Let us then enter the joy of the Christmas season and contemplate its mystery, even in the face of much chaos and stress around us.