

# ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 6 DECEMBER 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 3: 1-6

## "The Paradox of Advent"

### 1. The paradox of the advent season

The Advent season reveals that we live within a seemingly unbridgeable paradox! Our various readings for this Sunday leap from the pages of scripture calling us to prepare for new life. Yet, we are too busy and distracted, just as the people of New York in the movie *Enchanted* are unprepared for the entry of the free, singing, life-loving Giselle.

As G Kevin Baker clearly presents the paradox:

The paradox is that the season of preparation is also the season of heightened distraction. ... While we are raising a tree to anticipate the gifts that will appear beneath its branches, Zechariah speaks of a mighty savior raised up with the gifts of mercy, forgiveness, peace and redemption. While the malls overflow with people trying to find the best gift for Christmas day, Paul prays that the people in Philippi will be overflowing with love ... While the world announces preparation for a holiday, John announces preparation for a way. ("*Unwelcome Messages*," G. Kevin Baker, *Theolog: The Blog of The Christian Century*, 2009.)

But let's not be too hard on our modern selves! Ancient societies were as unsettled by their messengers' from God as we are! And they were as equally uncomfortable with paradox. Messengers, like John the Baptist were always unwelcome and unexpected.

Giselle appeared out of a manhole in a New York street, and disturbed and confused city dwellers. John the Baptist just appears from the desert, the wilderness, wild and woolly, and challenges people to change the way they live. Jesus appears in a stable, on the fringes of society. *A strange place for a representative of God to appear?*

### 2. Wild messengers must keep appearing to keep new life emerging.

But they must keep appearing to keep new life emerging.

And new life always disturbs our ordered, comfortable existence and society. Ordered existence always conceals and denies certain aspects of power and imbalance and excluded possibility.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Gertrude the queen, and mother of Hamlet, has recently lost her husband King Hamlet of Denmark. Claudius, the former king's brother, hurriedly marries Gertrude and ascends the throne. Gertrude, like the royal court, avoids probing these events for the greater truth. She wants an ordered society and a secure, happy life. She strives, like Claudius, to blow away the clouds of grief that hang about Hamlet's being:

*Do not forever with thy vailed lids [downcast eyes]  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.*

*... If it be,  
Why seems it so particular to thee?*

Hamlet will not collude, nor hold back his feelings, nor give up his search for the truth of these matters:

*Seems madam? nay it is, I know not seems.  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black...*

*No, nor the fruitful river in the eye, ...*

*Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem, ...*

*But I have that within which passes show -  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (Hamlet, Cambridge School Shakespeare, 19)*

Yet, from where does the word of truth emerge about what is really happening in that society? From that which is outside society, from the edges of society! From the ghost of the murdered King of Denmark!

In our reading today, writes Brian Stoffregen, Luke

*"sets our story within the political realities of the world of Jesus and John the Baptist. Civil and religious leaders make up this list of political power, starting with the ruler of the Roman Empire -- nearly the whole world -- and ending up at the temple in Jerusalem -- where the high priests did their work." (Brian P. Stoffregen,  
<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke3x1.htm>)*

Within this context the word of God speaks to this world. But it arrives from outside this world. From the desert, the wilderness. And this voice calls society to prepare for new life, which requires a baptism of repentance!

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which has often been wrongly interpreted. It is about changing: changing our view and experience of God; changing the whole way the individual lives and society orders itself and uses power. As William Loader expresses it so well:

*It is not simply change of the individual, but change of the individual in readiness for change of the world. Change of the world means transformation, liberation, freedom, salvation.*

This is what the imagery means in the Old Testament text Luke uses, that mountains and hills will be levelled, that society will be changed. We can see this in the verses that follow from our reading, which make up next week's reading.

### **3. God, uncomfortable and lovingly moving us forward.**

Yet, what is really radical in this is the nature of God that is implied in our story. John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness with a word from God. An unexpected and an unwelcome word,

because it unsettles and calls for a preparation of a new life. The way all societies live eventually needs change! And God, who is creator is also a future God who seeks to lure humanity into more joyful and loving and peaceful and just ways of living!

God is always an uncomfortable God! God is not distant! We create a life that excludes God! As I said a few weeks ago, humans are actually not really comfortable with a God too close to us. We need distance from divine power and life. And if we feel comfortable with God, this is our own creation, our own comfort. Without Jesus Christ, we are unable to be comfortable with God who always seeks to open us out to new life and calls us friends and co-workers. New life, change, is never comfortable. It is uncomfortable until we actually set out on the journey of change, and then we become new beings, excited and open.

Yet, however we conceive or feel about God, God is the God of love, a persuasive agency and not a coercive agency, as Plato suggested, always in process with us, always Other, absent in our experience, yet present in accompaniment.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Advent will always be a season of paradox. On the one hand, it will be a season of preparation for new life breaking into the fixed patterns of our personal, familial, church and social life. On the other, it is one of heightened distraction and consumerism. Advent faith is also a paradox, one in which we experience God as both uncomfortable and lovingly moving us forward.

The way to live the paradox of advent faith is to prepare to fall in love with life so as to live in it regardless of the cost and the suffering. Roberto Benigni of *Life is Beautiful* fame illustrates such a preparedness to live in love at all costs in his film, *The Tiger and the Snow*. It is a romantic comedy set around the early days of the Iraq war. Benigni is Attilio, a poet and professor at a university in Rome who falls in love with Vittoria. She rejects him, and when she goes to Iraq to write a book on the war, she suffers a serious head injury. She lies unconscious in a bomb-damaged hospital, where social chaos dooms her to die. Learning that the hospital is severely lacking in supplies, Attilio makes his way through the equivalent of several circles of Hell, similar to Dante's *Inferno*, to find medicine for his dream woman -- encountering mine fields, directionally challenged camels, and suspicious American soldiers. Bizarre and bold.

A beautiful metaphor about someone who is filled with the Spirit of life that he is prepared to give his life for the love of another person, even when she rejects him.

He enthusiastically encourages his students how to live:

Everything is dead! If you fall in love everything becomes alive... Everything moves when you fall in love! Squander joy! Waste happiness! Be exuberantly sad and reserved! Make happiness blow in people's faces...

And Attilio does this where suffering and war seek to destroy life!