

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
ADVENT CAROL SERVICE
SUNDAY 13 DECEMBER 2009
Mr Robert Sanderson

"The Light of Life"

1. CHRISTMAS

The Christmas story is the most well-known and best-loved of all the Jesus stories. It is probably the only religious story shared by the society at large – known and even enjoyed by those who are not religious. It's my guess that it will be not uncommon to hear preachers in pulpits all over the world thump the desk as they claim that the true meaning of Christmas has been exploited and that it has become nothing more than a self-indulgent spending spree of selfishness.

Now while preaching against the excesses of a production-consumption society is right and proper; I don't believe Christmas is the time to do it.

People at large are aware that there is something fundamentally different about the Christmas season. For many families it is a time of catching up with each other and with friends. In spending time with one another. And all these are wonderful things which persist despite the commercialization.

I am confident, that in all of the gift-giving and socializing, there is a general underlying awareness that Christmas is about more than enjoying oneself. Firstly, we find a tremendous willingness of many people, irrespective of what they believe, to give to local charities at this time – giving of their money, time and gifts. Secondly, many people actively seek out church services, concerts of Christmas music and of carol singing in parks or on the streets of cities. Hearing the stories like this maintains a continual connection with the spirit of Christmas.

We have just sung the carol "O little town of Bethlehem" in which there are these lines:

"yet in your dark streets shining
The everlasting light,
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in you tonight."

This is a truly universal human expression of the way things might be. Advent is about awareness; about sensing the transcendent.
To put it another way...

Advent is all about promoting consciousness, not provoking consciences.

2. LIGHT

Our carol service today is structured around the way Light occurs in both the Hebrew and the Christian texts.

Light is one of those fundamental symbols buried deep in the human psyche. We instinctively

understand its importance. From our ancient ancestors being frightened of the dark and awaiting the rays of the new dawn to the new-born child opening its eyes for the first time. It is no wonder that all our ancestors valued light. Nor is it surprising that it was associated with the sacred and the visions and glory of God. Darkness and light are to be found in every religion, every culture and in the dreams of everyone of us.

The archetypes of 'light' and 'darkness' in all their rich symbolism continue to flourish in the verbal, visual and written language of every culture today. In every human being there is an innate understanding of what it means to be in darkness and to see the light.

The journey we have taken through these readings examines some of the incidents where the writers of the sacred texts have been inspired to express the light of hope and renewal in a darkened world.

3. THE NATIVITY STORIES

Mark's gospel (the oldest) has nothing to say about Jesus' birth. Paul, even earlier, has only two passing references. It was a matter of little importance to them. The wonderful stories of the birth of Jesus are to be found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These are very different accounts which contain very different events. The most obvious difference is that Matthew's account is from the father's point of view and Luke's from the mother's point of view. We have become used to thinking of them as being combined into one continuous story. In fact, the birth stories continued to evolve after the gospels were written. Matthew talks about the 'magi' or 'wise men' or 'astrologers' from the west following the star. You will notice that Matthew does not specify how many there were. We have just heard carols where there are *three* kings at the manger. I'll say that again. We have just heard carols where there are three *kings* at the manger. This was a later tradition which wanted to say something different about these visitors.

The nativity stories were written by the gospel writers to express something about Jesus which was important to them. In other words, these are metaphors or parables just like the ones that Jesus made up. If we focus on the *factual* events of the story without appreciating that they use *literary* devices to convey a particular meaning, then we miss out on the vast richness that the stories offer.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The First Christmas* put it this way.

"Did these events [birth stories], including especially the spectacular ones, actually happen? The debate is not only fruitless, but a distraction, for it shifts attention away from the truly important question: what do these stories mean? Quite apart from whether they happened, what did they and what do they *mean*?" (p. 36)

Luke has one of the most enduring images of the whole Christmas story. The shepherds being flooded with light and the angel announcing Jesus' birth to the strains of the heavenly choir. In our advent reading, as with all of the readings, we left them hurrying off to Bethlehem.

Here's a story of what might have happened after they returned from Bethlehem.

A friend comes up to the shepherds and says,
"Where have you been?"
"We have been to Bethlehem."
"And what did you see?"
"We saw the world's best hope."

“What does it look like?”
The shepherd replies,
“It looks like you and me.”
(From an idea by Jay McDaniel)

4. INCARNATION

And so we are drawn inescapably to the incarnation – the fundamental idea behind all our readings about Light. Right from the beginning of time the spirit of Love is incarnate in the world. It is in every child that is born, just as it was with Jesus. There is nothing that is so filled with hope and promise as the new-born child. And yet, there is something special about Jesus.

Gretta Vosper in her book *“With or without God”* says this:

“We find in Jesus’ ministry an incarnation of god simply because in much of his recorded work we see that drive to live out in his relationships all the goodness we associate with the divine: his challenges to the status quo, his recognition of brokenness, and his upholding of the oppressed. We see that same incarnation in any number of social-justice heroes and spiritual leaders, but we see it in one another, too. When we live out the values of love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, we, too, incarnate god. Or, in different terms, *when* we love, we experience and express our fullest humanity – our divinity.”

I started this address by making the point that many people in Western society, religious or not, appreciate the special nature of the Christmas season. This is a great point of connection between those inside the church and all those who would seek more.

Advent reminds us that the light continually comes into human darkness.

Hope, peace, joy and love are God’s gifts to us.

They are also the precious, shining sunbeams that *we* can offer *to others* who may be struggling in their own particular darkness.