

Advent and Christmas 2008

Christians are people of the past and of the future.

Our faith is shaped and formed by the events of the past. The power of God in creation. The Godly guidance of humans as they were taught the ways of God and rebelled against the teaching. The patient preparation of a Godly people to receive the Divine Son. The Christ moment – in birth and death and resurrected glory. The Word of God intruded into our history and our lives by the Holy Spirit. The history of a Christian people, saved and yet sinful.

Our struggle to be worthy of a God who created us and redeemed us makes no sense unless we are also a people of the future. The future for each of us is death, a death in which we are reborn to eternal life. Then we shall see God – the Creating, Redeeming, Sanctifying God – face to face. The future is also the final consummation of God's faithful people into the eternal city, the new and heavenly Jerusalem. The future is the Christ King coming in power and majesty to judge the world by fire.

Advent opens our minds and hearts to the future, as we prepare once again to celebrate the events of the past by which we are made the people of God. For a moment at the start of each church year, we allow ourselves to be brought to a vantage point from which we can glimpse our own future and the future – almost beyond the ability of our minds to grasp – of the whole of the cosmos of creation.

And then we immerse ourselves in the moments of our salvation, following once again the rich pathway from Bethlehem to Nazareth, from Galilee to Jerusalem, from a manger to a cross, from a tomb to immortality. We learn as we follow this pathway each year, and the little that we learn year by year will take us to heaven. We stumble along the way. We recover and return to the manger, and marvel at the Word before us. We seek the forgiveness of the Christ child. And the Child who will suffer the cross restores us to the innocence and goodness of that first creating moment.

Our song at Christmas is that of the angels. "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill to all men!" We return to the song of the angels again and again through the year of grace that we keep Sunday by Sunday. The angels will indeed surround us as we gather, and will join us as we sing their song.

It has been a good year for our Communion. Sin and wickedness have touched us, but we have glimpsed greatness as we have seen our people respond. We are in a very real sense a people waiting to glimpse the dawn, and the psalms sung by the Temple Watch have been very much our own as we "watch and pray" for the unity, visible and eucharistic, for which we have worked and prayed so long.

In Zimbabwe, we have watched the struggle of our people with poverty, violence, injustice and now an epidemic of cholera. This Christmas, there is neither food nor medicine for these people who have become His poor.

In the Congo we have seen new church buildings and the homes of our people again damaged by war in that country that seems to be always at war. This Christmas, our people will be in the hills, still too afraid to be in their homes.

In Cameroon, another of our people who worship in French, the simplicity of mud churches echoes that of Bethlehem itself, and the violence of Islam echoes the ancient might of the Empire into which He was born.

And so it will be in Kenya, which I visited in the past few weeks, and sat with the orphans who have a building but no beds, and a school with no seats, but a people so burning with the love of the Christ child that are building eleven churches to the south of Lake Victoria, and five to its north, in the midst of violence and persecution. Under a roof of rough plastic sheeting where a new mud church is rising, eighty-seven young people came forward for Confirmation and First Communion one afternoon, and an uncountable parade of mothers in white uniforms committed themselves to the ideals of the Mothers Union.

And in central India, churches have been destroyed and the homes of Christians ransacked by a newly intolerant Hinduism, and our fellow Christians have yet again taken us to the law courts in yet more violence among those who bear the Christ child's name. But in the South, new churches gather on flat rooftops and in unfinished buildings, and prepare to celebrate the birth of the true God in a land that has given birth to too many Gods that are false.

In Pakistan, to celebrate His birth except in secret will be to invite death this Christmas.

In Central America, where our new Spanish Province has its heart, the violence of the drug lords (a powerful symbol of the wickedness in too many of our nations) hurts domestic life and travel as does poverty and crime.

But we have good things to celebrate.

Our very small church in Ireland has nurtured and nourished our work in Kenya, and seen the seed give a rich harvest. Our church in England boasts two great shrine churches at Portsmouth and Lincoln, the glory of both still emerging in restorations. In France and Switzerland we are gathering Anglican people estranged from their faith. In Japan the sacrificial witness of a faithful bishop, a small band of faithful clergy (including one who lives as a hermit in the hills above Kobe, praying for the conversion of his people), has begun to reverse the liberal tide in Anglican dioceses.

In South Africa, our bishop has been gathering and richly educating our clergy who otherwise would spend most of their time in lonely isolation from each other. A new altar linen and vestment making business has been established, and its profits will make that church less dependent on missionary giving.

In Canada, three beautiful churches are overseen by three tireless bishops, and each has presents to the world the timeless beauty of Anglican worship. Canada has been a powerhouse of support to my work as Primate. I am most grateful.

In the United States, at the cutting edge of Anglican apostasy, we provide havens of peace and beauty in our parishes. Just as importantly, we have a vital ministry to those who are still trapped in the structures of apostasy, and to those who are isolated and deeply hurt, and who have yet to discover an Anglicanism that they can once again trust.

In New Zealand, among the most abusively liberal Anglican environments anywhere, we at last have parishes emerging and ministries being developed, and two newly ordained deacons studying for the priesthood.

In the Torres Strait the tenth anniversary of our work is being celebrated with comprehensive planning to transform these remote island communities into models of Christian society.

In Australia, we have just celebrated our twentieth anniversary; we have taken the daring step of basing three regional bishops serving both our Communion and Forward in Faith Australia to the North, the South and the West. Our cooperation in shared Lenten and Advent services with local Roman Catholic parishes is growing. Our church school on the Gold Coast of Queensland has just achieved two thousand enrolments from pre-school to university entrance. For twenty years, we have been sorely tested and richly blessed.

In many of our churches, a new awakening of the desire to "sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and come follow Me" has seen unexpected growth in the religious life. But all our plans for Him are as nothing alongside His plans for us.

We thank God for the places where we are being tried, and the places where we are being rewarded. We pray for the unity of His body, still at times seemingly that of a Child.

My hope and prayer this Christmas is for the richest blessing of the Christ child to come upon each of you: my brothers who are your bishops throughout the world, the priests and deacons who serve you parish by parish, the men and women who have given their lives to Jesus Christ, and whose communities are "lights to the world in their several generations", to all of those who have done something beautiful for God by supporting our work this year, and each and every one of our people, who gather to worship at the manger, and who have caught the vision of the God who came down from heaven. May the Christ child be with you!