

**The Letters of**  
**ROD**

**to the Congregation**  
**at Saint James**

**with a Foreword by**  
**The Most Reverend Fred Hiltz**  
**Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada**

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# THE FOREWORD

by The Most Reverend Fred Hiltz

March 2, 2012

I am delighted to offer these few words by way of preface to “The Letters of Rod”. Canon Gillis and I go back almost forty years. We were classmates at the Atlantic School of Theology where we earned our Master of Divinity in 1978. We were ordained deacons together in 1977 and priests together in 1978. For a number of years we served in neighbouring parishes. Rod in French Village and I in Timberlea-Lakeside, Rod in Mahone Bay and I in Lunenburg. In the in between years Rod served in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and in the latter years in North Sydney. By then we were both serving the Bishop as Archdeacons - Rod in Cape Breton and I on the South Shore. While Rector of St. James, Armdale, Rod also served for several years as Archdeacon of Halifax and subsequently as a Canon of the Cathedral Church of All Saints. He was always a tremendous support to my ministry as bishop, offering good and practical counsel. To this day I cherish the friendship we have enjoyed as colleagues in ministry.

When I was asked to prepare this preface my mind went immediately to a gem of a book, “Here I am – Reflections on the Ordained Life”, by Richard Giles. His reflections are based on the Ordinal in the Book of Common Prayer of The Episcopal Church. One chapter is entitled “Unfolding The Scriptures”. He writes, “What the people of God are hungry for in the Sunday liturgy is not a learned paper but food”, food for the “journey of daily living in the gospel”.

The very fact that Rod's letters and sermons are being collected and bound is a testimony that through them the parish family of St. James has been well nourished in the last fourteen years.

"Our boldness in the ministry of proclamation" writes Giles "will consist of using the opportunities given us - in the Sunday homily, the newsletter, the comment for the local press, the web page - with the utmost of care and a real sense of the power placed in our hands. Preparing words for such occasions is not a chore to be got through, but a sacred trust".

That my friends is the way Rod has considered his writing and his preaching - as a sacred trust, among others, conferred in ordination. It is a trust he has honoured by his reading of the text (he is one of a very few priests I know who still uses his Greek New Testament), his study and thoughtful reflection. Well prepared and well delivered, his sermons have touched the lives of many, shaped their faith and informed their living as followers of Christ. To this ministry Rod has brought a brilliance of mind, and a passion of spirit for which we are ever grateful.

My own hope is that in retirement Canon Gillis will do some writing in the area of homiletics. He has much to offer the next generation of those who seek to be faithful ministers of God's Holy Word and Sacraments. He could mentor them in the ways of liturgical, pastoral, and prophetic preaching. I believe that could be a wonderful dimension to Rod's lasting gift of himself to the ministry of our beloved Church and its commitment to God's mission in the world.

I am so pleased the parish has taken the initiative to collect "The Letters of Rod". With you, I give thanks to God for

his ministry as priest and pastor, messenger and steward of the mysteries of God.

“Well done good and faithful servant”

Your friend in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fred J. Hiltz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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# THE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS LETTERS

1998 *The birth in time of the timeless Christ of God.*

This time last year I attended an elementary school Christmas concert at the school of our youngest child. The sixth grade class performed a segment entitled "Christmas Around the World." Through music and drama, the sixth graders reminded the audience that Christmas celebrations vary from one culture to another. Christmas music, family traditions, the manner of gift giving, the Christmas table fare, each of these often bear a very definite cultural stamp. That sixth grade pageant, so wonderfully performed, got me thinking about the great diversity of Christmas experiences. The fact is, the manner and "feel" of Christmas shows considerable variation from time to time, culture to culture, and place to place. Even at an individual level there exists a wide variety of circumstances and situations with regard to the celebration of Christmas. The season may mean travel for some; for others it may mean receiving travellers and guests. The holiday may mean a time of rest and recreation for some; for others it may mean stress and deadlines. Christmas may bring a sense of satisfaction and contentment for some; but for others the holiday may be characterized by disappointment and want.

There is, however, one eternal gift at the centre of our Christmas celebration. The birth in time of the timeless Christ of God is at the very heart of the church's proclamation this season. The celebration of the nativity of

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our Lord places all our transitory hopes and fears within the cradle of God's enduring and steadfast love. Customs may vary and feelings may rise and wane; but the love of God in Christ cuts across the borders of time and circumstance. However, what is most remarkable about this timeless gift is the way in which Christ redeems each particular time. Notice the message of the gospel accounts of the nativity of Jesus. They tell of a universal message of peace and everlasting Divine favour; but this message enters into the concrete world of a poor stable, a shepherd's field, a foreign occupation, a tyrant's reign, longing magi. Their time, our time, all times, the love of Christ redeems. May the peace of David's city be with us always.

**1999** *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us ... " (John 1:14) "And she brought forth her first-born son ... and laid him in a manger ..." (Luke 2:7)*

One of my favourite moments of the church year is the proclamation of John's Gospel in the Christmas midnight Eucharist. The first verse solemnly announces "In the beginning was the Word ...." the rhythmic verses move to capture all that we celebrate in the Birth Day of Christ;" the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; ... " This reading was assigned to the celebration of the nativity in ancient times, before the development of the season of advent, when the nativity marked the beginning of the Christian year. The Prayer Book tradition, and the (new) Revised Common Lectionary each assign it a significant place in the Christmas cycle of readings. It will be the gospel reading at the 11:30 p.m. midnight Eucharist in our parish.

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For many worshippers, the story of the birth of Jesus, according to St. Luke, captures in several verses the full meaning of the nativity of the Lord. The mother and child, the shepherds and angels are the wonder of Luke's account. They populate our hearts at the Christmas celebration. Provision is made for this reading to be used at a Christmas celebration. It will be the Gospel reading at the Children and Family Eucharist Service at 4:30 p.m. Christmas Eve, and again at 10:00 a.m. Christmas Day. Clearly Luke would have us understand that the Christmas story is the Christ story.

Each of these Gospel readings has a compelling pair of messages. The readings call us to worship. St. John bids us join in a hymn to the Word made flesh. St. Luke beckons us to place our earthly voices with those of the heavenly host -rejoicing in peace and divine favour. The readings, with equal force, call us to lives of mercy and compassion. John tells us that what God means for the world is conveyed in the flesh. Luke places the birth of the Christ child in the midst of poverty and oppression. We should know that for both John and Luke, God is worshipped and the world matters dearly. May our celebration of Christ's birth join our adoration and praise to a striving after justice and peace.

**2000** *"The People that walked in darkness have seen a great light. ..•" --Isaiah 9:2 (Revised English Bible)*

The display of seasonal lighting is something of a compensation for the darkness which overtakes us at this time of year. I love the advent wreath tradition which has us gradually increasing our light as we move toward the

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feast of Christmas. This practice conveys something of the notion of the darkness attempting, but not succeeding in, the overcoming of the true light of Christ. However, I have some sympathy for those who move early to challenge the winter darkness with those stunning arrays of artificial lights. Here is an emphatic and clear protest that darkness does not dim our spirits. The heavens seem to present yet another view. Shorter days mean an earlier appearance of the stars. The crisp air makes them glisten with a frosty vigour at this time of year. The lights are on in heaven. The one who dwells there will also dwell here among us. The enduring presence of God is symbolized by a light in the darkness. It is a powerful image in places where the brightness of the day contrasts, so completely, with the darkness of night. Such symbolism is well understood in our part of the world at this time of year. Is it not clear what Isaiah tells us: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land as dark as death a light has dawned."

One of the great accomplishments of Isaiah is the balancing of judgment with hope and consolation. It is little wonder that Isaiah forms so much of the Text of Handel's Messiah. Two of the alternative canticles for Morning and Evening Prayer in The Book of Common Prayer (pp. 28-29) are from Isaiah. The Old Testament readings for Christmas, one at each of the three Eucharists, are from the prophet Isaiah as well. Isaiah tells us in the above verse, for instance, that the enthronement of a new King would light the way forward to prosperity and peace. These ancient and venerable prophecies help us better understand the meaning of the birth of Christ Jesus. They provide a theme of hope and consolation which is then fleshed out with presence of God in Christ. May we savour the words as they are proclaimed during our services this Christmas.

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The lights of the Christmas season are certainly splendid. How much more splendid is the radiance of the Christ child and all that such a child may bring.

**2001** " *He is the radiance of God's Glory, the stamp of God's very being ...*" Hebrews 1:3  
(*New Revised English Bible*)

The Children's writer Dr. Seuss gave us a wonderful story about the attempt of a mean spirited villain who makes some interesting discoveries about the nature and meaning of Christmas. I encourage you to read, or read again, his classic story *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. The title itself is very interesting. How could anyone steal Christmas? Well the idea is perhaps not so far fetched. Dr. Seuss's "grinch" attempted to steal Christmas by stealing the trappings and trimmings of the holiday.

Early Christians have sometimes been accused of stealing Christmas from the pagans of ancient Rome. They certainly are accused of shamelessly converting the trappings and festivities of an ancient Roman holiday for use in the Christian celebration of the Birth of the Lord. Each December 25, shortly after the winter solstice, ancient Rome celebrated the annual rebirth and return of the sun. The focus of this holiday was the return of the unconquered sun of righteousness. The daylight gradually lengthens as darkness is dispelled and defeated. The holiday enjoyed great popularity in the Rome of the fourth century. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire the feast of the birth of Christ was assigned to December 25th. It seemed more practical to take over the trappings of this holiday than to either compete with it or suppress it. Some might say that things have come full

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circle. The modern sentiment to "put Christ back in Christmas" is not far removed from the notion that Christmas has been stolen from the church by the secular world. Gift giving, tree lighting, social festivities, works of charity, and even the themes of peace and goodwill all may be engaged without reference to the birth of the Christ child.

Christians may continue to engage all these activities knowing that humankind possesses a wonderful gift. It is not found in the trappings of the holiday. But it may be found in the powerful humility of Bethlehem. There in the person of the holy child of Bethlehem is the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being. The Son of God takes our human nature and we behold God's glory. We behold our future as God's people. We behold the destiny of the created order. We are no longer left to strive for peace and justice all alone. God enters into human community and pours out peace and salvation in Christ. The earliest of Christians celebrated this event with all the festivity their time and culture had to offer. They knew that not even the sun with all its warmth and splendour could compare with the gift of the word made flesh. Once again at Christmas, the church celebrates the giving of this gift. We have no need to fear that the meaning of Christmas will be stolen. How can anyone steal a message that is meant to be shared with the whole world.

**2002** *"God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly."--Luke 1:52 ( The Song of Mary or "Magnificat")*

We reckoned the fence we were building would last longer than the house which it surrounded. However, in a matter

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of mere months, a wicked wind storm easily erased whole sections of the fence. The weight of the fencing materials, together with our cantilever like design, actually contributed to the collapse of both the fence and our confident prediction about its life span. Things which seem durable, strong, and permanent often fall. Frequently the forces of demise are as elusive as the wind.

One of the great ironies of history is the speed and ease at which seemingly important and solid features of the culture are readily overturned. I remember watching with wonder as the Berlin Wall came down. Almost in a twinkling of an eye, wholesale assumptions about how the world was organised had to be revised. Every generation can point to examples of how the mighty have fallen, the invincible have been overcome, the unthinkable has come about. The poet Shelley offers this observation in his poem *Ozymandias*:

*“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: / Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!” Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

One of the themes of Scripture is the way in which God’s steadfast and enduring commitment to justice and righteousness challenges human endeavours. There is no facet of human culture that cannot be shaken in advance of God’s unshakeable kingdom. The promises of God often seem like folly in a world captured by its own sense of things. It is a prophetic spirit who hears and recognises the faithfulness in the voice of God. Mary is certainly one such prophetic spirit. The Song of Mary praises God for the manner in which salvation will overturn the order of things with favour towards those who long for justice and righteousness. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. ... He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.” The Magnificat summarises the wisdom of prophets, psalmists, and evangelists about

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the power of God to transform and defeat the most deeply entrenched injustice. Often human needs seem so permanent, but the remedies seem so seasonal. The liturgies of Advent and Christmas offer a profound challenge to us to see things in dramatic reversal. Despite the transitory trials and tribulations of the times, the mercy of God in the Christ child endures forever.

**2003** *“Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy...” - Luke 2:10 (BCP)*

A cheerful sales clerk in a national retail store was extending the familiar “merry Christmas” to customers as they left the cash register with their purchase. It was the first time this season that I was wished a merry Christmas. The sales clerk’s greeting got my attention. Last year some businesses instructed their sales people not to extend a “merry Christmas” to customers. When the media made this policy public, the store cited the desire not to offend those who not celebrate Christmas. Many Christians, indeed many people in general, thought the decision a poor one. The offending word in the phrase merry Christmas is, of course, the word Christmas which comes to us from the old English phrase Christ’s Mass. Christians, therefore, can be forgiven in advocating that society “put the Christ back in Christmas”.

When it comes to Christmas greetings, the oldest one I know of is found in the Gospel of Luke. It is a distinctively Christian greeting. The angels, at the birth of Jesus, announce to the shepherds: “... *I bring you good news, news of great joy for the whole nation...*” (Luke 2:10b R.E.B.) The greeting heralds great joy that is accompanied by great substance. The good news is that God pours out

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his love and commitment to the world in the person of Jesus who is deliverer, messiah, and Lord. The love of God is manifested in the simplicity of the stable. God brings greetings and redemption to the whole nation, including those like the poor shepherds working in the cold dark hill country of Judea. Those often forgotten or invisible to the world are remembered first by God. The greeting of the angels to the shepherds provides an example of the way in which the Christian community should greet the world. We are called to greet the world with the message about God's love in our midst; but we are called to do so with sincerity and substance. That is the perhaps the second reason why the sale clerk's greeting was memorable. I don't know what religious conviction, if any, the clerk professed. However, I found in the greeting a sense of joy about this season. The sales person both said, and meant, "merry Christmas".

Christmas, for Christians, is the celebration of the birth of our Lord. I hope the Christian community will be able to do at least three things as part of nativity celebrations. I hope we will act towards both neighbour and stranger in a manner that is indicative of the good news of Christ; I hope we will celebrate in eucharistic worship the birth of The Christ child; I hope our birthday greetings on behalf of The Christ child will be cradled in the birth of new life within us. May we proclaim a merry Christmas to all people of good will.

*Source of light and gladness, accept all we offer you on this joyful feast. May we grow up in him who unites our lives to yours; for he is Lord now and forever. -B.A.S. p. 273.*

## 2004 *"A child has been born for us ... the prince of peace" -Isaiah. 9:6*

What can pastors, in times such as ours, write about the traditional Christmas message of peace on earth and good will towards all people? The scale of the suffering produced by war and conflict in our time is now extremely large. It is impossible, for example, not to be aware of the terrible depth and dimension of the conflict and violence in the Middle East. Media reports seem to dwarf proverbs of peace, reducing them to platitudes. From among the many news stories out of the Middle East, I found the story of Margaret Hassan of Care International to be one of the most disturbing. The aid agency director was taken hostage in Iraq on her way to work. It is now believed she was murdered by her extremist captors.

The prophet Isaiah is one of the major voices heard in the Christian Church at this time of year. His prophecies of hopeful anticipation fill our liturgies and inform our praise. Handel's "Messiah", for instance, contains a number of beautiful texts from Isaiah. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called: Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (No.11 Chorus. Is. 9:6). It is something of an irony that Isaiah's prophecies come from an area of the world that is the stage for so much international conflict and mayhem. His words are grounded in the context of the exile in Babylon (present day Iraq) and the return from exile to Jerusalem. Isaiah's audience understood, first hand, both the distress of war and the challenge of rebuilding for peace. Isaiah's message is that the best way to welcome peace is to actively prepare for it.

It seems to me that this is exactly what is so powerful about the example of people like Margaret Hassan. The Irish born Hassan gave the past thirty years of her life to the

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people of Iraq. During that time she was an advocate for them in the international community. An article in the Church Times states: "Mrs. Hassan was an extraordinary woman who dedicated her life to the poor and disadvantaged in Iraq, particularly the children. Through her courage, tenacity and commitment, [she] assisted more than 17 million Iraqis living in the most difficult of circumstances. Everyone who met her was touched by her personality and compassion". The extraordinary life and circumstances of Hassan can be an inspiration for those of us who struggle with more ordinary situations. Lives of hope and peace give new and added credibility to messages of hope and peace. Throughout the seasons of advent and Christmas, Christian will gather to hear messages of hope from our scriptures. Our prayers and praise will celebrate the arrival of one who is called the prince of peace. May we welcome Christ by sharing his peace, in some tangible way, with the broken world around us.

**2005** *"She gave birth to her first born son ... and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." --Luke 2:7 (NRSV)*

The wind wanted to shoo us along home after school; but the cold was no competition for the displays of the season. The main street of our town was strung with Christmas lights. Store windows displayed toys, seasonal merchandise, and festive decorations including, of course, the Christmas tree. No matter how cold the weather, Commercial Street at Christmas time was a routine detour on the way home from school. However, there was only one display that really signaled the arrival of Christmas itself. It was the appearance of a large outdoor manger

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scene on the church grounds. First, a few weeks before Christmas, the manger was put in place, framed with rough wooden beams and filled with straw. The front of the manger was covered with a clear pane of glass. Then, just prior to Christmas Eve, appeared the figures of animals, shepherds, angels, Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child. The Nativity scene remained in place well into the season of Epiphany, long after the merchants had packed away their Christmas displays.

The debate over the naming and ownership of symbols can be as heated as apple cider. Is it a Christmas tree or is it a holiday tree? Perhaps it's a case of a rose by any other name. However, The Nativity scene is a symbol that, for Christians, goes to the heart of the matter. Much more ancient than the Christmas tree, the use of a manger in Christmas services probably pre-dates the Middle Ages. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with developing The Nativity scene as an object of popular devotion. The population of the Gospel story surrounds the Divine infant and family. Angels and animals keep company with poverty stricken shepherds from the hills of Judea. Later magi will arrive. The kingdoms of this world really will become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

Symbols have the power to challenge us. The Nativity scene is no exception. The manger is outside because there is no room inside. It's a stark reality that continues to confront the poor, the homeless, refugees, displaced persons and the vulnerable. Christ in the manger is all of these. Yet the one born on the outside creates an inside for all people in the kingdom of God. The Christmas season provides an opportunity to contemplate the Nativity scene in church, in pageants and drama, on Christmas cards and in carols. May our contemplation make us more aware of the great welcome God extends to us in Christ; and may God create a welcoming heart within us.

## 2006 *"Joseph went ... from Nazareth to the city of David called Bethlehem". --Luke 2:4 (NRSV)*

Describing a piece of music to someone who has not yet heard it is difficult. This past several weeks I've been listening to an instrumental piece entitled *On The Way to Bethlehem*, from a collection entitled *Pilgrim Songs*. I wish I could explain more clearly how much of a strong sense of the season this music elicits. It captures the imagination in a way that familiar holiday music does not. It does not whisk you quickly to the holiday destination. *On The Way to Bethlehem* is a long piece with both variety and repetition. The music has a distinct Near Eastern flavor. The arrangement and rhythm are evocative of the plodding nature of a journey. It calls to mind long and laborious days walking, lumbering animals in caravan, the purposeful steps of a pilgrimage. Moving forward under a hot sun is slow going. I wonder about the many nights under a cold and starry sky. Devotion and prayer were surely part of the trek. There is a feeling of hopefulness in the music, but predictability is not so much present. I listen and I read. The music seems to give nuance and vitality to the familiar verses from Luke's Gospel. "*A decree went out ... the whole world should be registered ... all went to their own towns ... Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem ... with Mary who was expecting a child ... while they were there ... [At last!] she gave birth ... there was no place for them in the inn.*" The music and the story draw out something of the travel tension in the church's celebration of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The Christ is coming to us even as we are coming to worship him.

Worship is one of the necessary treasures for the journey. Worship reminds us that we travel in the company

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of the Divine. It places our journey before the wide horizon of God's purposes for us. We go as a worshipping people. Justice, love, peace, and hope grow within us on the way. Worship strengthens the faith and resolve of a pilgrim people.

The journey through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany is highlighted by acts of worship. We praise God in unison with Mary. We acclaim God in company with Anna, Simeon and Zachariah. We adore Christ with the shepherds. We sing praises in concert with the angels. Together with the Magi we too come to worship the newborn king. Worship, like the pilgrimage of which it is a part, requires the risk of faith. To travel with God is to open one's self to the possibility of change and transformation. God's love and grace are poured out in worship. Eyes are opened to see Christ in the lives of those we meet along the way. We become more caring of all God's children. We are called to be less accepting of the injustice and suffering that is often the lot of both friend and stranger. In the end, the journey shapes and strengthens and disciplines us. The road to Bethlehem is eventually the road to peace on earth and favor with God. So too is the road traveled by today's people of faith. Like new music to fresh ears, it is a road that must be experienced to be fully understood.

**2007** *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." -Luke 3:4*

Stuart McLean is one of Canada's most popular and entertaining storytellers. His Christmas recording Vinyl Cafe: A Christmas Collection contains some wonderful stories, including "Dave Cooks the Turkey". Dave volunteers to look after Christmas dinner at his house, in

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order that his wife Morley and their children may volunteer at the foodbank on Christmas day. Only late on Christmas Eve does Dave discover that looking after the turkey means looking after all aspects of the meal. He has overlooked one crucial piece of preparation. The story is hilarious, and provides some interesting insight about holiday preparation and celebration.

Advent presents a number of challenges. It is the first season of a new church year, but is often lost in the end of the calendar year. Advent allows us to prepare for the coming of Christ into our midst, but is often collapsed into an early start of Christmas festivities. The focus of Advent is preparation, but activity and holiday planning often blur the focus of this wonderful season of preparation.

Preparation is crucial to taking hold of life's large moments. Young people study to prepare for life following graduation. Careful retirement planning is given serious and detailed preparation. Preparation for life events runs the gamut: financial planning, obtaining skills, physical conditioning, emotional preparation, and spiritual practice. Members of the Christian community are called to thoughtful preparation for spiritual events such as baptism and marriage. Preparation allows us to fully claim the promises of God, and enables us to keep faith with both God and others. This time of year many people are planning to spend time in comfort and with good company. Others are preparing for a Christmas alone or in need.

*"Prepare the way of the Lord."* John the Baptist called God's people to prepare for the coming of the messiah. The kind of preparation John called for is known as conversion. It has little to do with activity. It has everything to do with reflection, prayer, relationship, and faith. How else does one really prepare for the coming of justice and peace? This advent season catch the wave of the season. Take some time for prayer. Create some opportunities to be kind and generous to others. Become reacquainted with the scripture

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stories -those leading up to the birth of the Christ child. Prepare for a Christ who comes not as a fleeting guest but as a constant companion-one who will take you on a journey into faithful community.

**2008** *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all in whom he delights.” (-- Luke 2:14 Revised New English Bible)*

As I drove into the church parking lot I encountered a gentleman equipped with a camera and tripod. He appeared to be taking pictures of the rectory and church hall. I ventured over to ask him what he was doing. “That's Venus and Jupiter”, he said. Gesturing to the toward the sky, he continued with an unmistakable enthusiasm, “I'm taking pictures of Venus and Jupiter.” Just minutes earlier, on the drive home, a radio announcer was describing the lovely sunset in the western sky. The light from the sun, now below the horizon, gave the first sky of the evening a wonderful blue tint. Venus and Jupiter were on the rise alongside the moon. It was a perfect Advent evening.

Canadian songwriter Neil Young sings about “blue blue windows behind the stars”. Vincent van Gogh, in his most famous painting “Starry Night”, depicts a village nestled around a church, cradled by the earth, canopied by the stars all embraced by the sky. The increasing telescopic exploration of space, with vivid pictures of stars and galaxies has broadened our sense of place and context. The mid twentieth century picture of small blue planet Earth is set against a background of a vast and beautiful cosmic order. Such images provide a sense of context that is profoundly spiritual. We are asked to ponder “galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth our

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island home, by your will they were created and have their being.” ( Prayer Four, The Holy Eucharist).

The sky at his time of year is a naturally occurring icon. The imagery evokes the awe and wonder of a chain of mysteries. The earth is joined to the heavens. Heaven and Earth are set within the context of God's creative care. St. Mary the Virgin carries the son of God in her womb. The Divine child is cradled in the starkness of the stable. God's love is incarnate in the midst of his people. A sense of completeness marks each “mystery within a mystery”. The result is a sense a peace brought closer by the nearness of God. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all in whom he delights.”

That December evening, as I left my car and headed into the house, I did my own survey of Jupiter and Venus in the early night blue sky. The day had been filled with news about economic uncertainty, political crisis, and a variety of cares and concerns. The advent sky, if just for a few moments, dwarfed these concerns. Even if just briefly the perspective shifted to something more peaceful, more hopeful, more heavenly. I had a suspicion the photographer and the radio announcer may have had a similar sense. It seemed to me a perfect metaphor for Advent and the birth of the Prince of Peace.

*“Eternal God, this holy night is radiant with the brilliance of your one true light. As we have known the revelation of that light on earth, bring us to see the splendor of your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord”. A Christmas Prayer at Midnight (Book of Alternative Services p. 273)*

## 2009 *"Glory to God in highest heaven ...and on Earth peace..." (Luke 2:14)*

November weeks in Halifax have been sunny and pleasant. Still, the days are short and the night is a crisp cool. It seems a long time since June past when we walked the grounds on top of Montjuic in Barcelona. It was a beautiful arid sunlit day. We took the cable car to the fortress peak. The vista overlooking the port city of Barcelona was breathtaking. We could see for miles. Montjuic is an infamous fortress with a dark history for the people of Barcelona and the region of Catalunya. The fortifications would remind any Nova Scotian of the Citadel or York Redoubt. The fortress itself was the scene of awful atrocities committed by the State during both the Barcelona Rebellion of 1909 and Franco era Spain. Montjuic housed political prisoners and saw firing squads. Montjuic Castle, because of its past, has been chosen as the site of an International Centre for Peace dedicated to fostering peace initiatives. Official literature describes the hopes for the future "The International Centre for Peace will be a central feature of the new site, occupying principally, the area of the old parade ground. The centre will be devoted to fostering peace through dialogue, training, and education, as well as research into conflict prevention, management and resolution and promoting a culture of peace." These are values that resonate with a great many Canadians.

Time has a way of making its presence felt. It seems a long time between a June day in Barcelona and a late fall day in Nova Scotia. It also seems like a long time since the values of peace keeping and peace making were front and centre in Canada's profile in the international community.

St. Luke, a writer of the Christmas story, understands that the birth of Jesus Christ has a way of pulling both God's time and human time together into one decisive moment. At the birth of Jesus a heavenly host sings out

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*"Glory to God in the Highest and Peace on Earth..."*  
According to Luke, "heavenly host" means literally "a huge army from heaven". A peaceful army of angels heralds the birth of Christ and the birth of a peaceful kingdom. God's will is a reality, not only in heaven, but on earth as well. Contemporary Christmas celebrations, often commercial and private in nature, may seem very distant from the original Gospel message of social peace. The good news is that it does not have to be as far off as it may at first appear. The people of Barcelona are transforming a once mighty fortress prison into a place that will be a tool for peace. Pray that our celebration of the birth of the "Prince of Peace" will transform us into a favored people impatient for peace on God's Earth.

*Creator, kindle we pray in every human heart the true love of peace. Guide with your wisdom those who take counsel for the nations of the earth, that justice and peace may increase until the earth is filled with your covenant love. Amen*

*--A Bidding Prayer (adapted from the Book of Alternative Services p. 124)*

**2010** *"So it happened, that it was while they were in Bethlehem, that she came to the end of her time of waiting" Luke 2:6 (adapted from The J.B. Philips translation).*

The arrivals area of Halifax Airport is frequently a place of heightened expectation. International passengers proceed from Canada Customs and into the main arrival area. Those waiting seek familiar faces each time the closed frosted doors are opened. Domestic arrivals are organized a little differently. Passengers descend to the arrivals area on an

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escalator. Travelers become visible through clear glass sliding doors as the escalator reaches the ground floor. Smiles, waves, and an occasional "there they are" break out among those who wait. Meeting a flight is sometimes just an errand or an easy favor. Other times greeting someone at the airport is the culmination of a time of lengthy waiting and preparation. Clues are often observed in an embrace, or the number of people in a group of greeters, or the sound of excited voices.

"Partners for Refugees" gathered at Halifax airport one evening last autumn to welcome the family we are sponsoring. "Partners" is comprised of people from several Anglican Parishes, including a good-sized contingent from St. James. Members of related sponsoring groups joined us at the airport. The most excited of our company were the extended family of the new arrivers. We sponsors had spent several months in preparation; but it was the extended family of the refugees who had waited with the greatest longing. They themselves were familiar with waiting in a refugee camp where you wait on help from the other side of the world. Waiting is sometimes tangible and filled with activity, sometimes emotional and filled with anticipation and apprehension. Often it is all of these things.

Mary's time of waiting came to an end when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Prophecy, prayer, visions, disruption by imperial edict, dangerous travel, an overcrowded city, and the longing of heaven and earth went before that silent night. No wonder joy was palpable when waiting finally ended.

Advent is our season of waiting. Spend it wisely and prayerfully. When purchasing gifts, donating to charities, preparing your home for visitors, planning meals, rehearsing for concerts, volunteering in the community, in all your tasks take time to pray with thanksgiving for the recipients of your labors. Take time to thank God for the

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moments of waiting. For joy surely comes when waiting gives way to fulfillment.

*God of all hope and joy, open our hearts in welcome, that your son Jesus Christ at his coming may find in us a dwelling prepared for Him. (A New Zealand Prayer Book).*

**2011** *"A young woman is expecting and she will give birth to her child." - Isaiah 7: 14*

Ghosts may haunt Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol", but in the end it is tiny Tim who steals the old miser's rehabilitated heart. Charles Shultz fills "A Charlie Brown Christmas" exclusively with the voices of children as they search for the true meaning of the season. Children feature prominently in "Miracle on 34th Street" and "It's Wonderful Life." Children populate many of the popular stories of the Christmas season. Christmas, of course, is all about a child. An ancient prophecy from Isaiah finds fulfillment in the birth of the Christ-child to the Virgin Mary.

The feast of the *Nativity of the Lord* is pregnant with manifold meaning. As a birth story the nativity explores hope, expectation, and joy as well as anxiety, fear, and danger. These themes resonate with the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams in his recent address for the day of prayer and action for children. *"In children we recognize the preciousness and dignity of the human being as well as a vulnerability which calls for our care and protection."* This insight from the Archbishop of Canterbury may be readily applied to the story of Jesus' birth. The Nativity is God's affirmation of human dignity. It is a demonstration of God's care and protection for the vulnerable.

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Children are so representative of the fragility of the human condition. Children are among the hardest hit by famine, war, poverty, malnutrition, and social displacement. From child soldiers on foreign battlefields to the increasing number of hungry children at North American food banks, children struggle with many obstacles in the pursuit of a life of peace and fulfillment. The economic and environmental legacy being bequeathed to children is a gloomy one. Caring for and protecting the children of the world, providing them with the opportunity to experience a full and undiminished childhood, joining them in a sense of awe and wonder, and nurturing in them a sense of basic trust in life, these are essential both to the well being of each child and to the salvation of the human family.

Every birth story is a window on the story of the nativity of Jesus. The birth of every child calls us to place hope above despair, to care protectively for all that God offers us in each new arrival. As we celebrate this holy season may we grow in our resolve to love and care for the precious gift that is the children of the world. "*A young woman is expecting and she will give birth to her child*". This Divine promise is at heart of the nativity of Christ. The same Divine promise is at the heart of each human birth.

*Light Divine, in the birth of the Christ child we see your glory. May we who share in this mystery grow daily in your love. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. (Adapted from the prayer over the gifts for Christmas I--Book of Alternative Services.)*

## THE EASTER LETTERS

**1999** *"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission." - Hebrews 5: 7*

Once during my student days I had opportunity to visit a parish in order to help out with the major service of Easter day. Afterwards while greeting the worshippers as they departed the church the rector received this comment: "Rector that wasn't an Easter sermon; it was a Good Friday sermon." The tone in the woman's voice was neither critical nor angry: but both her voice and her facial expression betrayed a person of great sadness. Each year her rector attempted to preach an Easter message of joy and vision. Each year, for several years, the woman had made very much the same kind of comment as she left the Easter service. Many years later I had opportunity to get to know this woman. She was trapped inside her experience of sadness. She could not break out; no one could completely break through. She understood very well what it is like to offer up prayers with tears; but knowing that those prayers have been heard was an experience which still awaited her.

This year Christian preachers everywhere will proclaim anew this truth: Christ is risen! It is a message which many faithful Christians not only confess with their lips but also show forth in their lives. I also know that this message breaks through the experience of loss and sadness for many people only with great difficulty.

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The gospel writers tell us that Jesus Christ faced something of this himself. "Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me: yet, not what I want but what you want." (Mark 14:36). The gospel writers also tell us that Christ was able to work through this difficult time because of his perfect relationship with God." Truly this man was God's Son" (Mark 15:39). Perhaps our ability to work through a Good Friday kind of experience is connected to our relationships as well. First, there is our relationship to God which for Christians is a relationship with Christ. We learn about God by spending time with Christ and praying with Christ. Secondly there is our relationship with others in the Christian community. It is by being drawn out of our pain and isolation by the Christ in others that we may come to understand that prayers with tears are truly heard with power.

The shadow of the cross is often cast over us during our "years in the flesh" but that shadow does not have to become the complete darkness of the tomb. Through the varied ministry of our church in prayer, proclamation and pastoral care our suffering can be redeemed and our lives freed from experiences of sadness. This Easter, even if as a beginning, may you hear and know that Christ is Risen indeed! Alleluia.

**2000** *"Then they described what happened on their journey and told how he had made himself known to them in the breaking of the bread" -Luke 24:35 (REB)*

This is the age of mass rapid transportation. Somehow it just doesn't seem that way in traffic. Likewise, the information revolution can equip us with nifty personal

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communications gadgets. So why do I frequently feel I've been stranded in an electronic box canyon? *Please press one for this, press two for that, press three for something else.* Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan welcomed us to a global village. I had the privilege of living in a village at one time. The loneliness and alienation of our world bears little resemblance to the quality of village life. What we have here is a world full of contradictions. We are promised access, availability and community. What is delivered, more often, has the flavor of the stuck, the jammed, and of disappointment.

The disciples who are remembered in the wonderfully crafted account of Emmaus Road were stuck, jammed, and disappointed. God's promises seemed hopelessly contradicted. Luke gives voice to their profound sense of loss: "*We had been hoping that he was to be ...*" At the outset, the road to Emmaus was not a road to a hopeful future. However, it became, very quickly, a road to discovery. What the disciples discovered on that road, we too must discover. Resurrection drives so many breakthroughs. It was preceded by betrayal: It gives us a Christ who is with us always. It opens with denial: It results in shouts of recognition. It came down the bitter path of suffering and death: Both are deprived of their power and victory.

Sometimes the joy of life is jammed impassable by grief. We can become stuck in anger and resentment. The beauty of the world is at times dimmed by disappointment. Life offers up frequent contradictions. Our Easter faith answers such contradictions. "*Lord ... kindle our hearts on our way that we may recognize you in the scriptures and the breaking of the bread.*"

## 2001 *"Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning."*

I managed a short trip to my home town in mid March. It was easy for me to recall how the adventure of winter and the exercise of lent always seemed entwined. Atlantic drift ice besieged the coastline. It silenced the comforting sound of the ocean: it armed the wind with an extra blast of cold. It allied itself with the snow and ice and made the occupation by winter seem permanent and complete. It is an experience many people can identify with this year. The barometer of public opinion seems to agree that this is the winter of our discontent. All of which has us longing for spring as for something made glorious.

Lent is about longing. It's about navigating a seemingly endless desert with a destination in view. It's about the people of God who, even in a barren land, crave the fullness of Life. Jesus spends his first forty days of ministry in the wilderness. He enters into solidarity with the people of God in a place where their deepest longings were experienced. Their longings become Christ's longings.

One of the most powerful expressions of the longing that leads to faith is found in Psalm 30. It is one of the psalms appointed by the church for use in the Easter season. The psalmist recounts the struggle of a person near the brink of death. The stark nature of suffering is placed alongside the hope for rescue: "*Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning*" (ps.30:6). The longing of the distressed person is at the center and core of the psalmist's message. This psalm is first about an individual's plaintiff cry for help. However, the psalm eventually becomes an anthem for the people of Israel once restored to freedom after a long captivity. The weeping of being captives is replaced by the joy of a new day in their homeland. It is interesting how the themes of health and deliverance in this psalm become linked with the idea of

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rejoining a restored community of faith. In the ancient world the sick feared isolation and loneliness as much as nations feared defeat and exile. Restoration to community was a measure of the wholeness of the individual. Restoration of community was a measure of the redemption of the nation. The longing of the individual and the longing of the people shared a common orientation towards God.

Lent, the wilderness, winter, the night season, each one points beyond itself for completion and fulfillment. Our deepest longings, if we are attentive to them, may lead us to fulfillment and completion. The psalmist would have us know that our longings lead us to restoration. The Easter faith finds our longings fulfilled in the restoration of resurrection.

**2002** *"The water that I shall give will be a spring of water within ... welling up and bringing eternal life" (John 4:14. New Revised English Bible)*

My grandmother once operated a small store on one of the main streets of our town. Long after the business closed, the store window provided me with a childhood view on the rail road workings across the street. I had a front row seat as the large steam locomotives rolled in to be re-supplied with coal and water. The water tower was a most interesting operation. One of the rail crew stood on top of the locomotive coal tender, lowered the huge spout into place, and a gusher of water poured into the tender. It was amazing to think that this water, rising up as steam inside the locomotive, was able to power such a huge heavy piece of equipment along with an entire freight train. It was as if someone had captured a huge water geyser and put it to work inside the engine. Water can be an extremely

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powerful force. Properly channelled it works to the advantage of human community.

There is an important shade of meaning in Jesus' offer of living water. The rainy season produces copious amounts of running water. Its usefulness is in the way in which it is made to work for humankind. It spills rapidly and dangerously through ravines and gorges. It wells up and becomes life giving in a dry and thirsty land. Living water, for Jesus, was fresh water which was channelled into wells and cisterns. Living water, so understood, is a symbol of the life of the new age rising within us.

Grief, resentment, anger, joy, compassion, love, all these pour powerfully into human experience. We know what it is like to have either anger or joy welling up within us. We know what it is like to be in the presence of someone as either anger or joy rises within them. When we are in such situations we are in the presence of great power. Channelling or directing such power in a constructive and life giving way, so that we might be more genuinely human gives us a foretaste of resurrection and rebirth. Grief, for example, may haunt us and lead to despair. Grief may also heal in us and open us up to others in need. Joy may allow us to celebrate life in all its fullness, provided, we have a community in which to express our joy with others. Much depends upon our ability to see ourselves as human vessels in which Christ's gift of living water may well up to eternal life.

Lent is intended to create within us a thirst for a life of wholeness in communion with both God and others. The thirst is a good thing. It signals that some part or other of our life, spiritual, emotional, physical, communal, is being hollowed out in anticipation of the arrival of the water of life. We prayed for this with the collect on the third Sunday of Lent this year: "*Almighty God, whose son Jesus Christ gives the water of eternal life, may we always thirst for you, the spring of life and source of goodness ...*" Easter makes

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it possible for us to pray such a prayer with confidence and faith.

**2003** *"Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast"--1 Corinthians 5:7-8 "Jesus said to Peter, 'Feed my Sheep.' "*  
*-John 21:17*

Have you ever known a convert? Chances are you have. In fact, chances are each of us have been converted to something at one time or another. Life has a way of sifting us. With the support and encouragement of those who care about us, such sifting can lead to a new lease on life. Conversion may appear as a sudden and radical change. It can also mean slowly coming to recognize an influence that has been part of our pilgrimage for a long time. There is the blinding vision of St. Paul. There is the slow almost remedial progress of St. Peter. What each has in common is the emergence of a commitment that has been nurtured by love and grace. Commitments by their very nature draw us out of self and toward the other. Peter's increasing care for the other disciples allows him to be drawn away from his own fears. Paul's sudden realization, that he has placed himself as a barrier between God and others, frees him to break down the barriers to true community.

Easter is a feast of life in which our faith is nourished by The Lord of life. Our response is to be constantly open to a conversion towards all that is life giving. In our baptism we celebrate both the new life that is ours, and our commitment to life giving discipleship.

The last two questions in the baptismal covenant challenge us to think about the nature of such a conversion and commitment.

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Will You seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Love, service, justice, peace, respect, dignity, are the values of those who have been converted to an Easter faith. These values stand in stark contrast to the moral and spiritual famine of our world. It is in seeking, serving, and striving, in accordance with such values, that we witness to the message of resurrection. This Easter may we be renewed in our faith, continue in a Christ like life, and affirm the gift of life in others.

*Almighty and everlasting God, in the paschal mystery you established the new covenant of reconciliation. Grant that all who are born again in baptism may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith. Grant this is the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.*

**2004** *"For anyone united in Christ, there is a new creation" II Corinthians 5:17 (R.E.B.)*

Lent may indeed mean spring; but in our part of the world, the Lenten experience remains largely a winter one. This certainly seemed to be true this year with Lent beginning the week following the blizzard or weather bomb of 2004. Behind the neighborhood in which I grew up there was a fairly large marsh. The marsh would freeze in years when there was flooding from early winter rain. It was possible to skate and play hockey on the marsh; but there was something seemingly unusual about that frozen state of affairs. Later in life, I would learn a word that fit perfectly the experience standing on the middle of the marsh in winter time--the word "surreal". The quiet and almost

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motionless state of the marsh in winter was beyond real. The air bubbles in the clear ice gave the impression that most of the life of the wet land was on hold. What a contrast this presented to the usual vitality of the marsh with its waving green and brown bulrushes or cattails. The marsh was home to frogs, birds, and a variety of insects. At night a chorus of peeping sounds arose from the marsh, sometimes accompanied by a light fog drifting up out of the ooze. There was no real accounting for spring until the life signs returned to the marsh.

The surreal moments of life seem to place everything seems on hold. The breath of life itself appears captured by some unseen force. The fragility of peace and the prevalence of violence in the world , the loss of focus and the presence of discord in community, the death of a loved one and the experience of grief, each of these can create in us a sense that time and circumstance has slipped beyond what is real. Life, as a normal course of affairs, seems unable to come to fruition.

St. Paul proclaimed to the people of Corinth, "*...in Christ, there is a new creation*". The Easter faith is one which offers the promise to transform each and every aspect of our life --personal, communal, and social. Christ's resurrection is the sign of an offer of new life in all its fullness. The truth about Easter is a truth about being ground in the reality and reliability of God's love for the whole created order.

**2005** *Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." -John 11:25*

Meetings seem to be an inescapable part of church life. The church, like many other organizations, requires that people

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meet together from time to time to advance the work that must be done. For over a decade I was a member of a diocesan body that employed a training consultant for its members. Our consultant once commented that, in his place of work, he tried to attend only those meetings that are life giving. At first I thought his approach unrealistic. Who has the luxury of attending necessary meetings and gatherings based on whether or not they are "life giving". However, the idea behind the comment has a great deal of merit—especially for the Christian Church. I wonder how meetings and other activities would rate, if they were judged according to such a principle. Does this meeting, this event, this service, provide something life giving for those who attended?

The encounter between Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus was filled with pain and difficulty. Martha and Mary were grief stricken. The community was in formal mourning.

Jesus himself wept with compassion. It is in the midst of this scene of turmoil and distress that Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life". The raising of Lazarus by Jesus transforms the encounter into a life-giving event. We know, of course, that the life-giving nature of Jesus is not limited to this one event. The "I am" means that the entire person of Christ is life giving. Christians are called to follow Christ in this by living lives that are life giving. Thankfully, a great many people do so. I think each of us can identify someone as a life giving presence in our life. There may well have been times when they found it difficult to do so. Indeed, engaging the call to be life giving or life affirming often requires a willingness to encounter the agony and anxiety of others.

The people of God are placed in the world in order that they may be life giving and life affirming. Resurrection and life are an essential characteristic of God's people in Christ.

The events of Holy Week and Easter are a time to pray about and ponder this particular calling. As a spiritual

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exercise, and with courage and humility, we might consider two very related questions. To what extent does the Church enter into the pain and fractured nature of our world? To what extent does the Church embody the life giving nature of its Lord?

Easter sees us celebrate the saving work of Christ who is resurrection and life. We can give thanks that he lives in the life giving influences of others. Let us pray that, in the eyes of others, he lives in us as well.

**2006** *"I will tell you a mystery! ... 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" --I Corinthians 15:51, 54 (NRSV)*

Clergy are frequently asked for their take on movies with religious subject matter or themes. I've already been asked whether or not I plan to see the soon to be released "The Da Vinci Code". The movie is based on the book of the same name by Dan Brown. "The Da Vinci Code" is something of a publishing phenomenon. There is actually a web site where a number of clergy who have read the book respond to the question: Do you plan to see "The Da Vinci Code"?. Brown's book stands in a long line of lore and legend that takes Gospel material as a point of departure. "The Da Vinci Code" is a suspenseful work of fiction based on a secret legacy of Mary Magdalene. The romance and intrigue of Brown's mystery novel have thrilled millions of readers. "The Da Vinci Code" is complete with conspiracy theories, religious corruption, and references to technology and gadgets. Modern readers love it.

What is most intriguing is the response that the book has generated. Suspending disbelief is necessary any time we watch a movie or read a mystery novel. However, many

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readers of the "The Da Vinci Code" wonder if the plot of Brown's book is true in whole or in part. Even professional theologians have waded into the excitement and controversy spawned by Brown's story line. I suspect part of the reason for this is the thirst for the mystery and meaning of life. If only we could crack the code and solve the mystery. Perhaps the truth is "out there" some where. Perhaps someone is keeping the truth from us. The pay off consists in finding an answer.

The core of the Christian message has mystery at its heart. The life giving resurrection of Christ is the central mystery of faith. However, it is not a mystery to be solved but rather a mystery that inspires. In Scripture, the point and purpose of mystery is not to confound but to disclose. Disclosure, the opening up of God to the people of God, accompanies us on the path of justice and new life. For Mary Magdalene the empty tomb is not a secret to be cherished or a problem to be solved--it is an invitation to become open to the mystery of life. This is St. Paul's message to Christians in the city of Corinth. Ancient people were familiar with mystery religions and religions based on special insider knowledge. What Paul tells them is that the resurrection is a mystery made manifest. "*Listen, I tell you a mystery...Death has been swallowed up in Victory.*" The resurrection of our Lord gives meaning to this life and makes visible our ultimate destination. It is the purpose of our work as a community of faith. Saints both ancient and modern have transformed their world because the mystery of their life in Christ transformed them. Jean Vanier, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, each have grasped something of the mystery of life. Their contribution to the lives of others flows from the Christ within them. The mystery of resurrection is food for thought--more importantly, it is bread for our journey.

## 2007 *"For this son of mine was dead and is alive again..." (Luke 15:24)*

Part of the fun of "Antiques Road Show" is watching a person discover they have come into the possession of something of great value in an unexpected way. It's not just "hidden treasure" that turns up in unexpected places. Imagine finding a letter or post card from an old friend buried under all that clutter you are cleaning out of your basement or attic. Who wouldn't stop what they are doing, sit down on the floor, read the letter and re-live the memories it delivers. Consider a walk in the woods. There unexpectedly near the path is a beautiful "wild" flower. It is as lovely as a flower cultivated in a garden.

Each year people gather in churches of all types to celebrate Easter. One expects to hear about the empty tomb, the stone rolled away, the message that He is risen. However, one can find the message about resurrection and new life in unexpected places. The Gospels, for example, often foreshadow the resurrection of Christ with the life giving activities of Jesus during his ministry. The story of the young girl whom Jesus raises back to life from her sick bed is featured in Mark, Matthew and Luke. According to Luke, Jesus raises a boy back to life from his funeral procession. The miracle is an act of life giving justice and mercy for the boy's widowed mother. The raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel bears tremendous similarity to the resurrection of Jesus. The sign of Lazarus symbolizes new life in restored community. While these life-giving miracles are not the same as Christ's glorious resurrection, they anticipate Christ's resurrection by giving glory to God and hope to God's people.

One unexpected place in the gospel where the message of new life is found is in the story of "The Lost Son". The

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story itself is familiar enough. The young son receives his inheritance early but squanders it quickly. Returning home impoverished and in shame, he is welcomed as one who has returned from the dead. The prodigal is greeted with rejoicing and generosity. "*For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*" The son literally lives again in a renewed restored relationship offered to him as a gift. Here we have an unexpected clue about the wider meaning of resurrection. The new life that we celebrate at Easter is one that touches every aspect of our being. We may await our joyful resurrection of the body; but new life comes to us in Christ here and now, to heal our hurts, salve our wounds, renew our broken relationships.

This Easter celebrate the news that Christ, who has been raised once and for all, lives in the midst of God's people. Afterwards, go into the world with hope. The offer of new life in Christ will cross your path in ways that you might not expect.

**2008** "*Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast*" -*I Corinthians 5:7-8*

There was never any mortal danger if you fell in; but the challenge was to cross over without slipping and getting wet feet. Near my childhood neighborhood there was a stream. There was one set of stepping stones that provided the only place to cross. Springtime provided the most skill testing opportunity to ford the brook. The water was slightly deeper and much colder during Spring. It was an incentive to remain sure-footed. The skill lay in making careful strides across the gaps with firm footing on the

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stepping stones. There were just enough stepping stones, well placed and well anchored, to keep the intrepid from splashing in the cold stream.

Our religious heritage is rich with stories of pilgrimage and crossing over. We hear about the people of God who cross over into a place rich with promise. We recount how The Divine crosses over into history and journeys with the people of God. Unlike a child's game, such crossings are often a demanding venture. They shape the character and identity of the whole community.

During Holy Week we are invited to make a symbolic journey, following in the footsteps of Christ. The introduction to the Palm Sunday liturgy maps out the way. *"We follow him this week from the glory of the palms to the glory of the resurrection by way of the dark road of suffering and death."* We join the children of the Hebrews who greeted Jesus on his royal entry into Jerusalem. The palms we carry mark the start of our pilgrimage. On Maundy Thursday the liturgy of the church dramatizes the servant ministry of Christ and the servant nature of those who would respond to his call to "follow me". We celebrate the gift of the Eucharist and with it Christ's abiding presence in his community on their journey. The heart of Good Friday is hearing again the account of the passion of Christ. We recall his complete solidarity with the human condition. The celebration of the Easter Vigil on Easter Eve is filled with powerful symbolism about crossing over and touching down on the other side. The first liturgy of Easter, the Christian Passover, is built around images of passing over from darkness to light, from death to life. The Easter liturgy sounds a keynote of the entire Easter season, *"Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast."*

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter liturgies are observed with great devotion throughout the Christian world. Holy Week liturgies

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provide sure footing for those who walk in faith. The liturgies of Holy Week are the stepping stones that trace the path of Christ. We follow where Christ has led the way. The celebration of Holy Week joins Christ's crossing to our own. We hear it proclaimed as we step from Holy Week into Easter season with the opening greeting of the Great Vigil of Easter. *'This is the Passover of the Lord. We remember his death and resurrection by hearing his word and celebrating his mysteries; we are confident that we shall share his victory over death and live with him for ever in God.'*

**2009** *"Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (John 16:22)*

There is a certain level of risk involved when men write about the birth of their children. It is the mother, after all, who does all of the heavy lifting of labor and birth. However, the births of each of our children are my most indelible memories. Our first child was born on Good Friday at 5:13 in the morning. Labor began the day before, Maundy Thursday. I was a student and a newly ordained deacon at the time. The new arrival took priority. A colleague of mine conducted what were to have been my first Holy Week services as an ordained person. The weeks of Lent had been passed in anticipation of the baby's arrival. Easter took on a very special feel that year. Resurrection was celebrated through the experience of having a new born. More than three decades have elapsed since that Holy Week and Easter; but I have a lasting appreciation for a metaphor Jesus uses in anticipation of his passion and resurrection. According to John, as the time for

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Jesus' passion draws near, he speaks with his disciples in a parable drawn from birthing.

*"When a woman is in labor, she has pain because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (John 16:21,22 NRSV).*

Labor pains are not erased from memory. What is meant here is that the hard work of labor gives way to the euphoria that comes with the new born child. The original Greek language version of this story makes it clear that the pain and physical pressure of giving birth are transitory. The joy that comes with the new life is long lasting. Undercurrents of longing and anticipation flow throughout John's Gospel--no where more so than in this passage. The disciples will experience a double longing. They will long for Jesus after his death on the cross. After his resurrection they will wait with anticipation for eternal life. Jesus encourages them with the promise that their longings will be replaced with permanent joy.

There are a great many things to long and pine for in our world. Many of them, even if eventually obtained, fail to bring any true sense of peace or joy with them. Stories both ancient and modern counsel us to take care about the nature of our wants, desires, and longings. The Gospel is coaching us to see the connection between lasting joy and the things we long for in the first place. The disciples have a spiritual desire and longing for the fullness of a Christ centered life. Longing for a more peaceful world, a more compassionate society, for close or closer relationships with family and friends, for a sense of place or community, for a life of faith and meaning, such longings contain the seeds of joy and fulfillment. Righteousness brings lasting fulfillment to those who hunger and thirst for it. Each, year

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in holy Week and Easter, faithful Christians recall the passion and resurrection of Christ. Such recollections afford us an opportunity to carefully review our deepest human longings within the horizon of eternal life. What longings are laboring within you ? What joy and gladness is waiting to be born from them?

*O God you have made us for yourself, and against your longing there is no defence, Mark us with your love, and release in us a passion for your justice in our disfigured world, that we may turn from our guilt and face you, our heart's desire.-* A prayer by Janet Morley from "All Desires Known" (Morehouse-Barlow 1988 p. 13)

**2010** *"That you may have life in abundance" (John 10:10)*

More than thirty years ago I served a parish on the rugged Cabot Trail. Each Sunday I made the trip from Neil's Harbour to Ingonish and back again to conduct Sunday worship. The ride was always panoramic, winter or summer, day or night, foul weather or fair. The few white-knuckle moments did nothing to diminish the grandeur. Summer Sundays, however, were sometimes cliffhangers. Tourists and summer residents ambled on the trail. Unlike me, they were not often preoccupied with being somewhere at a specific time. Every once and awhile the car in front of me would pull into our church parking lot. The visitors would join the congregation for worship. A common refrain at the door afterwards was "What a beautiful part of the world you live in!" It was true. It has been true for every community we had the privilege to live in -- St. Margaret's Bay, Western Newfoundland, south shore Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, and the Northwest Arm at

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Armdale. What's more, when the situation is reversed, and you find yourself the visitor, the local beauty is remarkable. I attended General Synod for the first time in Winnipeg twenty-five years ago. The various reports, briefings and debates have long since left my memory. What remains indelible is the majesty of The Red River and wonder of the big prairie sky. Summer past I was off to study church buildings. They are beautiful and awe inspiring, but no more so than the natural environment in which they are set. Whether it was the European countryside, the mid summer drive from The Gulf Coast to The Green Mountain State, or crossing back up into the Canadian Shield, the diversity of our world is something to behold. Sheer biodiversity, life in abundance, is one of The Creator's greatest gifts to us.

Similar diversity and abundance characterizes the witness to Resurrection. Each of the four Gospel writers tells the story about the risen Christ from their unique perspective. In fact, we find in the telling of the good news a sense of resurrection even before the events of Good Friday. *"I have come that you may have life in abundance."* The witness of St. Paul provides many rich and varied impressions of the new life in Christ. The Book of Acts is a treasury of stories about the vital Christ. People of faith have always proclaimed, "Christ is alive". The multiple attestations of this faith are as diverse and abundant as the people who live it.

Faithful people continue to emerge from the darkness of personal "Good Fridays" and into the light of newfound life. It may be the person who works through a time of grief, an addict who has become sober, a person once lost to themselves who has found renewed purpose in life, the person who looks back on their life with a sense of fulfillment, a community working on a new vision for the future, a people that perseveres and rebuilds after a catastrophe. Abundant life is as diverse as the human family. The bold claim is that stories about abundant life

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are Easter stories. How have you discovered abundant life in Christ? What is your Easter story?

**2011** *"He saved others, he cannot save himself." - Mark 15: 31*

St. Mark is an evangelist of few words. His writing style is lean and to the point. However, like the other three gospel writers, Mark devotes a significant portion of his short Gospel to the story of Christ's passion. Mark isn't content with simply telling us what happened. He wants us to understand what it all means as followers of Jesus. Mark recounts the taunting of the bystanders in the final dark moments, *"He saved others, he cannot save himself. Let the Christ come down from the cross that we may believe"* This verse doesn't usually get much attention from preachers. After all what "good news" or Gospel is to be had here? Christ in his love embraces the full extent of human frailty, vulnerability, and powerlessness. The scornful spectators are, from one perspective, oddly correct. *"He saved others, he cannot save himself."* Christ in his passion has come to a place from which he is unable to rescue himself. The bystanders' dreary chorus of despair simply compounds his suffering.

The Easter story is grounded in a keen understanding of the dreadful power of suffering and death. Neither Jesus nor St. Mark the Evangelist underestimates the reality of the situation. Neither downplays the ability of powerful destructive forces to undo us. However God raises Christ from death to life in a sovereign act of Divine love--something the cynical bystanders did not anticipate. Salvation is accomplished by a partnership between Christ

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who confronts suffering and God the Creator who offers new life.

At the time of my writing the world is still watching as the people of Japan struggle with the catastrophic impact of the earthquake and tsunami. The teetering nuclear crisis adds to the fear and misery. Images provided from a multitude of technologies flash around the world. The visual documentation describes the suffering and anguish with photographic clarity and concision. It can be seen in the faces of young parents, the elderly, rescue workers, and public officials. The crisis in Japan has a compounding effect when it is added to recent previous disasters in New Zealand and Australia together with war and unrest in North Africa and the Middle East. The magnitude of the suffering vaults the question of salvation from the merely personal to the global. What are the prospects for the future salvation of humankind as events such as these unfold?

Profound suffering, whether on a social or personal level, can leave us feeling numb and powerless. Experts have invented the term "compassion fatigue" to describe such predicaments. We can never, of course, take God's place in such situations; but we are called to be disciples not mere bystanders. Empathy and compassion can make us alive to the pain and suffering of friend and stranger alike. We become more Christ like when we are attentive to those who are forlorn and overburdened. We may find that we can more readily entrust the future to God when we have acted with a sense of compassion and justice in a time of present danger. We are called to engage the suffering of others. In so doing we point beyond despair to the hope for humankind that flows from our Creator. Such is one of the differences between being a bystander in a crowd and being a member of an Easter people.

## 2012 “*Sir, we want to see Jesus.*” -John 12:21

Hearing a music artist on a recording may be the next best thing to being there. However, what a difference a live performance can make. “Live and in person” communicates how good an artist really is. It works the other way too of course. Sometimes advance hype and studio techniques wither when a live performance disappoints. Hearing about something or someone often creates interest, arouses curiosity, causes a stir and a sensation. But, as the old adage goes, seeing is believing.

An interesting story in John’s Gospel connects seeing and believing. St. John describes how some Greeks, having heard about Jesus, come to see him. They pitch their request to Philip with the simple plea, “*Sir, we want to see Jesus.*” It may be that they approached Philip because Philip had a Greek name. The Greek strangers put their request to someone like them, someone who speaks their language. This is their best chance of getting introduced to the Jesus about whom they have heard so much. We never find out for certain if the Greeks actually meet Jesus; but reading between the lines the message seems to be clear. Greeks from afar have come to see Jesus. Their visit and their request marks the beginning of wide spread belief in Jesus as the Christ of Glory. Biblical scholar Raymond Brown describes how, in this instance, “to see Jesus” means to “meet with him” and “to believe in him”.

The holy Greeks in this story had the real possibility of meeting Jesus in the flesh. We know, as well, that the resurrection experience allowed Jesus’ followers to see the risen Lord. What about us? Where do we search in hopes of seeing and believing in Jesus? John’s Gospel tells us blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe; but is there a companion insight to round things out? I suggest there is. The Greeks in this curious story come to see and

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believe in Jesus by first looking to people like them. So can we. It is by looking to the people around us, people who are just like us, seeing their faith, taking note of their commitment to serving Christ, that we too have the opportunity to meet, greet, and believe in Jesus the Christ.

Easter season 2012 coincides with the conclusion of my ministry in your midst as your pastor. As we celebrate this Easter together I will be especially attentive to the experience of continually finding Jesus alive and well and in person, in you the people of St. James. Jesus may be seen in your faith, in your commitment to the Gospel, in your dedication to the work of his church. My own belief in Jesus the Christ is all the stronger having witnessed him in this community of faith these past many years.

Christ is alive. Christ lives in us, and we live in Christ..

# THE THANKSGIVING LETTERS

1998 *"All Good Gifts Around Us"*

The community in which I grew up drew its lifeblood from heavy industry. Coal and steel were the fibre and fabric of the local economy. The Thanksgiving Holiday was not an immediate fit with the economic activity of the area. The one major exception resided with the local fishing industry. Traps and nets graced many a church sanctuary on Thanksgiving Sunday. Even in an industrial area, the theme of thanking God for the bounty and beauty of the earth shone through. After all, many folks had relatives and roots in rural areas. Others had gardens which offered up small quantities of vegetables. Therefore rendering thanks to God was not, in the end, a strange experience.

I've been considering the hymns we will sing on Thanksgiving Sunday. They are in the language of planting, ploughing and reaping. These hymns will certainly strike a chord with those who tend gardens, those who spend time in the country, and those who have rural roots and memories. However, what about those of us whose experience of life is mainly urban? What about those of us who live in the world of industry, technology, and business? What about those whose contact with the world and community is limited by the circumstances of life? Well I believe these same hymns provide us with a note of optimism. I'd like to suggest that Thanksgiving hymns, prayers, and readings will give voice to every heart. The

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hymns bid us thank God for the harvest, to be sure; but they also bid us be thankful for our life and our world. The hymns have us praise God for the gifts of joy, peace, community, and salvation which God bestows upon us all. I can't help but marvel that hymns which express such profound gratitude were written in such a laborious and difficult time. A successful harvest was the result of hard work, long days, and a constant contest with nature. The outcome was often very basic. Yet, thankfulness for the richness and depth of Divine love is a central theme.

Please join us this Thanksgiving holiday as we offer up hymns and prayers to God in thanksgiving for that which is bestowed upon us in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is in saying "thank you" that we will be enabled to live thankful lives.

**1999** *"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (St. Mark 9:50)*

A great many of us in our part of the world have the privilege of dressing up our meals. If just as an occasional treat, we can add desserts, seasonings, and side dishes to enhance our experience at the table. I'm not much of a sweet tooth; but I do tend to favour foods with seasoning. The Greek philosopher Aristotle cautioned that nothing in excess is good. I try to keep his advice before me when reaching for that wonderful seasoning.

Jesus used salt as a metaphor in his preaching. God's people are called to be "the salt of the earth." Salt, together with fire, are biblical symbols of purification. However it is salt as a seasoning which is the figure of speech in this saying: "Have salt within yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Food becomes more appealing in its taste, more interesting, more of an enjoyable experience when

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seasoned. What a clever mixture of images our Lord uses here. The salty flavour of Christian community is joined to the notion of peace. Peace, in a biblical sense, means the all-abiding presence of God. The poor and the afflicted are seen as both the objects of God's mercy and the focus of human compassion. The effects are two fold. The Christian community, which lives out the call to peace, becomes a seasoning for society. The Christian community which has the authentic appeal and flavour of the kingdom is the one which is steeped in the peace of Christ. It requires great maturity of faith to live out of the mandate of peace. Compassion, generosity, sacrifice, and sharing are some of the strengths of character which flow from Christ's peace in our midst. It seems to be just this kind of spirituality which Jesus understands to be the way to give the world a taste for God's kingdom.

The themes of Harvest Thanksgiving exist in layer upon layer. I think we know what they are: Divine providence, the abundance of creation, thankful faithful hearts, family and friends, stewardship, social justice. These are themes of peace. These are the values of a Christianity worth its salt.

**2000** *"I wish you joy in the Lord always. Again I say: all joy be yours. Be known to everyone for your consideration of others. The Lord is near; do not be anxious, but in everything make your requests known to God in prayer and petition with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will guard your thoughts in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:4-7 (Revised English Bible)*

This lovely powerful set of verses from The Letter to the Philippians is printed in the back of a devotional booklet

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that I take with me on hospital visits. The illness which results in a hospital stay can bring with it worry and concern. However, I have found that it is exactly under such circumstances that many people want to be thankful for the wider context of their life. They wish to place their prayers of anxiety and concern within the larger picture of thanksgiving. Coping with illness and upset may bring out in people a profound thankfulness for family, friends, co-workers, medical staff, and care givers. The reading from Philippians provides scriptural support in the struggle to broaden the focus, from illness and anxiety, to the love and consideration experienced from others.

What is true in intimate personal situations may be true as well in a societal and congregational setting. These are not the easiest of times in which to be a church member. The difficulty and controversy surrounding the residential schools issue is a major present example of the pain and struggle of belonging. Questions about balancing justice, integrity, and compassion abound. However, these are not new questions; it is not likely they will cease to be asked any time soon. The message from Philippians is clear minded in the face of such confusion. Prayers of distress and anxiety should be offered up from a posture of Thanksgiving.

We have much to be thankful for as a church. Christian churches provide places of service and compassion in many communities. Churches offer support and counsel; they give space to service organizations; they house food banks and clothing depots; they uphold and encourage their members, many of whom give time and expertise to the wider community; they are advocates for justice; they are partners in promoting cultural and heritage endeavors. Our own parish is typical in that it is filled with talented people who are committed to a strong Christian community. Our fellowship here is a blessing!

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In times past, Harvest Thanksgiving provided an opportunity to voice thankfulness for the wonder of life in the face of hard times. This Harvest Festival, people of faith may be feeling care and anxiety more keenly than usual. Bring our cares we may; but let's bring them as a thankful rejoicing people.

**2001** *"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how .... But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-27,29. NRSV)*

When I first began in parish ministry a great number of wonderful surprises awaited me. Many of those surprises came in the form of the life of the communities in which I was to serve. One delightful surprise was discovering the way in which Thanksgiving was celebrated in the small churches of farm country. Planting, tending, and sowing provides the framework of life. People adorn their churches with the produce of creation and the fruit of their labour. These things become a kind of sacramental sign of the relationship between God and people. I don't believe this relationship is often taken for granted. Harvest Thanksgiving is celebrated in both the good years and the lean years. Perhaps it is because of the regular and repeated celebration of harvest festival that the unexpected difficult years may be worked through in faith.

Jesus' parable (above) is a revelation illustrated from the obvious. The kingdom creates a place for us in this universe as surely as the farmer's planting creates a harvest. The parable counsels us not to give up on the kingdom

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when the rhythm of our life is disrupted by the tragic and the unexpected. There is also good evidence to believe that Jesus told this parable to caution those who would confuse the kingdom of God with their own impatient attempts to establish a kingdom by violent means.

This year both Canadians and Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving in the shadow of violence and disaster. It may be a lean year for hope and thanksgiving. Furthermore, many of us, about half the world's population, now live in cities. The rhythm of life is to a different drum. Yet this parable speaks still to our longing for security and a life brought to fruition. It speaks decisively about the inevitability of the Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom not to be taken by storm but harvested by the faithful.

**2002** *"Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay thy vows unto the most high." (Psalm 50:14)*

One of my friends is a professional artist. I have become accustomed to seeing his beautiful finished works. However, I recall once watching him sketch out the beginnings of a water colour. He translated flowers, a vase, a veranda railing and a distant scenic backdrop, onto canvas with skilful ease. What impressed me was the speed with which he captured the sense of distance, size and physical relationship of the objects one to another. He has an expert grasp of perspective. The ability to see things in their proper relationship is an important gift. Perspective is not to be taken for granted. Not long ago, I began wearing reading glasses. I'm still trying to get used to the way in which they impair my ability to see from near to far. I have to remember to look over the glasses to see into the

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distance clearly. It's a small thing perhaps, but gaining perspective now requires effort.

At Harvest Thanksgiving we have an opportunity to "*Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving ...*". We are bidden to say thank you to our creator for the wonder of creation, for the offer of divine love, and for the gift of salvation. The notion of tying thanksgiving to sacrifice is curious. As polite Canadians, many of us have been taught to believe that it does not cost anything to say thank you. The psalmist seems to have a different view. The psalmist tells the ancient world that the ritual offering of commodities to God cannot replace the offerings of a just and loving heart. The psalmist has spiritual perspective. The psalmist knows the importance of placing self in a proper relationship to such values as faith, love, justice, and service.

We sometimes lose our perspective. It is often easy to distance God, to place others in the background, to understand our world in terms of what we achieve. Harvest Thanksgiving is an opportunity to rediscover the nearness of the kingdom of God, to focus on faithful community, to see ourselves as creatures. May this Thanksgiving holiday be an opportunity for renewed spiritual perspective. A truly thankful life is a life offered up in service to both God and neighbour.

*"Blessed are you, God of Glory; you call us to give up all our vain attempts to reach you, and to come before you in thanksgiving for your great salvation, shown to us in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Psalm 50 Prayer, B.A.S. p770)*

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**2003** *For Food in a world where many walk in hunger, For Fellowship in a world where many walk alone, For Faith in a world where many walk in fear, We Give you Thanks, O Lord.*

The prayer above is a grace before meals. I encountered this grace many years ago as part of The Primate's World Development and Relief Fund annual campaign. The last line of the grace calls us to be thankful in Christ for all the blessings of this life. The first three lines of the grace call us to be thankful for food, fellowship, and faith. These things are blessings when they are present in life. When they are wanting they are unfulfilled needs. When absent from life these blessings are often replaced by their opposites --hunger, loneliness, and fear. This form of grace before meals is connected to The Primate's Fund because it is a powerful prayer that joins faith to action. As we say it, may we be empowered to help transform need into blessings.

Words, of course, have the ability to inspire us to do great things. Great leaders speak in order to harness the hearts and minds of people in building up the common good. Their ability to speak, so as to motivate, is grounded in values such as courage, compassion and justice. Consider, for instance, these words from the prophet Amos: “*..Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream*” (NRSV). Amos lived over seven centuries before Christ. As a Hebrew prophet he spoke passionately for justice in a time of affluence, prosperity, and religious hypocrisy. The theme of his message, and that of the other prophets, is taken up in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Thousands of years later the same words would inspire the great Christian and social reformer Martin Luther King. The words from Amos were in King's heart as he called for justice and equality. Those same words from Amos 5:24 now are inscribed on the monument

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which memorializes both Martin Luther King and his cause. They are powerful words of faith made all the more powerful by their embodiment in community.

Visionary words, whether in scripture or in prayer, can lead to some very concrete actions in our life--actions which can be characterized as just and righteous. At Thanksgiving we will hear scripture challenge us to be thankful: We will pray with thanksgiving in the midst of world full of need. Let's remember that the words of prayer and the words of scripture can be matched to so many opportunities to share in justice and righteousness. Some examples are: the food bank, soup kitchen, Primate's Fund, Anglican Appeal, refugee sponsorship, volunteerism. Streams of righteousness and rolling waters of justice may sound like a tall order; but its amazing how real they become when needs are transformed into even small blessings. This Thanksgiving as the blessings of our life are called to mind, so too should be a stirring within us for justice and righteousness. In this way, Harvest Thanksgiving will deepen our connection to both God and our neighbor.

**2004** *"The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed." --Ps.126:4*

Is this the end, or is it just the beginning? For many people, Harvest Thanksgiving is a holiday that marks the end of a season. It is time to think about the end of the growing season and getting the vegetables out of the garden. It is time to put up preserves after the summer, time to close up the camp or cottage for the winter. However, the Thanksgiving weekend is a bench mark for both the end and new beginnings. Thanksgiving is usually the first

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holiday of the new school year. Church organizations and programs are up and running by Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving finds people once again ensconced in their regular pattern of activities at school, work, and church. All moments of thanksgiving, in fact, have the sense of the cyclical, a turning of the wheel of time, about them. To give thanks is to embrace what has been given and to ponder that which is to come. The harvest is gathered from the field with gladness and rejoicing; but the empty fields lay in stark anticipation of the spring planting to come.

The psalmist applied this kind of insight to God's dealings with His people:

*Then they said among the nations,  
"The Lord has done great things for them"  
The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are glad indeed.  
Restore our fortunes, O Lord  
like the water courses of the Negev.  
--Ps. 126:3-5 (B.A.S.)*

The writer of Psalm 126 offers up a prayer that is both thankful and hopeful even in the midst of anxiety and concern. Foreign nations are reminded that the people of God once enjoyed a time of providence. A faithful people long for God to restore their national fortunes, to bring back times of justice, peace, and prosperity. The past is recalled with thanksgiving, and with an eye to a hopeful future. As surely as a dry and arid land are renewed with rain each season, so will the future be marked by renewed relationship with God.

Offering up prayers of thanksgiving to God is one of the hall marks of a healthy spiritual life. It connects our past and our present with God's future for us. There is a lovely Thanksgiving litany in the B.A.S. (p.128) which allows us to connect the cosmic dots of our life as people of God. It bids us pray for *"the beauty and wonder of creation, for our daily food, for our homes and families and friends,*

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*for health, strength, and skill to work and for leisure to rest and play, for those who are brave and courageous, patient in suffering and faithful in adversity, for all who pursue peace, justice, and truth, for all the saints whose lives have reflected the light of Christ." Every time we gather for worship, but especially at Thanksgiving time, our worship should allow us to recall the blessings of our life and look to the days ahead with a resounding "We thank you, Lord".*

**2005** *"Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay thy vows unto the most high" - Ps.50: 14 (BCP)*

The first parish I served, as rector, was Neil's Harbour in northern Cape Breton. Members of the Fishermen's Cooperative in the parish donated part of the value of their annual lobster catch to their church. The manner by which they did so was known as 'The Lord's Acre'. Each year, each participating fisher gave the proceeds from a particular set of traps to the parish. However, 'The Lord's acre' represented much more than a way of organizing a financial contribution. The gift that each fisher made included all of the preparation, the worry, the time, the labour and the fulfillment that accompanied each fishing season. It was an offering of self as well as money. This particular kind of giving is similar to how the people of ancient Israel approached the offering of the first fruits of the harvest to God. Their gift represented planting, tending, harvesting and rejoicing. The labour, anticipation, worry, work and reaping were all rolled up in the offering. The gift was part of their membership in the covenant community. The giving was grounded in their relationship with God and with one another. It was to be offered in conjunction with

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lives of righteousness and faithfulness. It was truly a sacrifice of thanksgiving and a vow to the most high.

As we celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving, we too can be mindful of the spiritual nature of giving. Of course it isn't so much the size of the gift, but the size of the commitment or sacrifice behind the gift that connects us as giver to God and to neighbour. Our gift of self through time, ability, money expresses our thankfulness for what God accomplishes in our life. It also allows us to act on our values in ways that touch the lives of others. There are so many beneficiaries in giving of one's self to others. This is true in giving to both church and social agencies. There is the family preparing for baptism, the patient who receives a visit from clergy or laity, the young couple being counseled for marriage, the person who has a need met by outreach, and the community that gathers in church on Sunday to celebrate the faith. There is the child whose day at school is made manageable because of a breakfast program. There is the critically ill person whose life is made more hopeful because others canvassed for medical research. There are the people of all ages whose lives are enriched because someone contributes time and expertise to a program or community organization.

*"Offer unto God the sacrifice of Thanksgiving ... "*. Notice the particular emphasis the translation from The New Revised Standard Version places on this verse: *"Make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God...."* This Harvest Festival may we affirm with the Psalmist that giving is a form of Thanksgiving, and that giving is joined to sowing and reaping in the kingdom of God.

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**2006** *"For everything there is a season ... a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted."*  
-Ecclesiastes 3:1,2 (-NRSV)

Very early the week following the Labour Day, we were driving east through Quebec and northern New Brunswick. We were on our way back home to Nova Scotia. It is a drive familiar to a great many people. Wendy and I have made this trip a number of times. In fact, we made the trip at a more leisurely pace, several weeks prior, during summer holidays. The beautiful scenery of the St. Lawrence and northern New Brunswick was much the same in September as it had been in July. However, those "low lying areas" you hear about had already experienced frost. There were subtle indications that the trees were turning color. One season was in the early stages of giving birth to another. Not only that, but traffic was much lighter than it had been in July. Clearly, the tourist season was slowing down. The fall was hinting its impending arrival. Each season brings change with its presentation. Yet the seasons themselves unfold within the predictable pattern of nature. Pursuits, adventures and tasks may vary from one season to another. However, the variations in our life unfold within the action of the larger human drama.

*The Book of Ecclesiastes* has preserved for us a well-loved poem, "*For everything a season ... a time for every purpose under heaven*". At first glance it seems like common sense. There are good times and bad times. There are Times to speak and times to keep silence, times to mourn and times to dance. However, the ancient sage who preserved this poem for us was well aware that the changing scenes of life must be understood within the larger setting of God's love and purposes. The same writer who praises a time for everything also writes; "*I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it*". (3:14).

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Many people are attending, quite literally, to the demands of the season. It is time to return to work, or to greet the first fall of retirement. It is time to go back to school, or to have a child move off to work or study. It is time to start a child in pre-school or Sunday school, or to begin that new job. It is time to re-engage the activities of church, home, office, and community. Many people are making challenging transitions at this time. Some transitions may be filled with excitement. Some transitions may engender feelings of anxiety. Indeed, as we are often reminded, and perhaps feel, our whole world seems to be changing ---sweeping us along in the process.

We may be engaging changes that the fall season brings to social activities. We may be trying to engage the swirling turbulent world. We may be entering a new season of life. As we contend with all of these, let's not forget the nature of God's enduring and steadfast love. As we tackle the changes and chances of this life, may the love of Christ, who describes himself as the beginning and fulfillment of all things, sustain us.

**2007** *"The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein." (Ps. 24:1)*

There is a short time just after sunrise when the sun hovers huge, brilliant and spectacular over the water. It's a miraculous event-even for someone like me who is not normally an early "morning person". When I lived on the northeastern tip of Cape Breton Island, the fishing boats steamed out in the pre-dawn. They were at work and beautifully backlit during sunrise. At the end of the day, not all that far away on the other side of the island, there is a

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similar miracle. The sun hovers red and huge and low before dropping below the ocean on the western horizon. I think of Psalm nineteen "In the deep God has set a pavilion for the sun...." I recall that well-known creation hymn "For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies." Just think of the out door venue for so many great spiritual events, according to the scriptures: the call to Moses in the burning bush, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven on the desert floor, the miracle of loaves and fishes on the grassy hill, the appearance of the risen Christ beside the sea of Galilee. Whenever Christians have celebrated baptisms in the waters of a river or lake the symbolism is rich and refreshing. Out door Communion services are alive with the biblical images of manna and of loaves and fishes. Saints, prophets and average folk alike have communed with God in the stillness of the great out doors. There is no form of human work that is not grounded, directly or indirectly, in the miracle of creation. As the Psalmist tells us "*The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein.*"

God's creation of the Earth is the prototypical divine mystery. The Earth is where God is revealed. It is where God provides. The earth and its inhabitants are the object of God's redeeming love. The signs of our incorporation into God's love in Christ, the water of baptism and the bread and wine of Eucharist, are themselves creatures from the hand of the creator. Surely part of our response to God in Christ is to respect the earth as a spiritual place. Harvest thanksgiving can be an opportunity to reflect on the connection between our spiritual life and our life on the Earth. Do we know the Earth as a profoundly spiritual place? Do we care for the environment? Are we concerned for the future of the planet? Are the resources of the Earth shared among all God's children? Scripture tells us that upon completing the work of creation, God saw that it was very good. As partners in creation, ours is a work in

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progress. Dare we say that our relationship to God's world is a good one so far? May we be actively and continually thankful for the blessing of the created order--the dwelling place of God's pilgrim people.

*O God, the source of all life, you have filled the earth with beauty. Open our eyes to see your gracious hand in all your works that rejoicing in your whole creation we may learn to serve you with gladness, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

**2008** *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest." (Luke 10:2)*

The Maritimes are experiencing a shortage of skilled workers at the moment. Many skilled people are out in the Alberta oil patch. Plenty of employment in one place means fewer workers elsewhere. It's one example of the tension that exists between abundance and scarcity.

Biblical scholars often refer to Jesus as an itinerant preacher. It means that Jesus walked a lot--from one end of Palestine to another. As he traveled he preached about the kingdom of God. In his travels, during the several harvest seasons of Palestine, Jesus would pass by fields rich with grapes, olives, grains and the like. Ancient Palestine had only the most basic tools for harvesting. Harvest time was labor intensive. It was important to get the crop out of the field as quickly as possible. A shortage of workers meant a slow harvest with an increased risk to the valuable crop. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..." Abundance in the field might be compromised by a scarcity of workers. Jesus used this serious situation as a metaphor for mission. There are so many opportunities to bring in the

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kingdom of God. Will too few disciples compromise the abundance of God's kingdom?

Scarcity and abundance are found in most societies both ancient and modern. It is not unusual for prosperity and want to be found in the same community. Jesus encountered many poor people living near those fields of plenty. The homeless poor of today are found trying to get by on streets thriving with business and commerce.

Our world encourages us to celebrate Thanksgiving with an abundance of family, friends, and food. It's a theme that graces the covers of magazines at this time of year. The Harvest festivals described in Scripture link gratitude with generosity and justice. I think Harvest Thanksgiving presents a particular challenge to Christians to bridge the gap between scarcity and abundance. We bridge some of the gap between scarcity and abundance when we take time to pray for someone or to spend time with them. We bridge the gap between scarcity and abundance when we share our talents and abilities in order to improve the life and vitality of our community. We bridge the gap between scarcity and abundance when we share our income, according to our means, for the work and mission of our church and for charities in the wider community.

It is important to observe Thanksgiving by numbering our blessings. However, Thanksgiving is also a time to measure abundance in terms of our relationships with others. Let's understand discipleship as our abundant and generous response to scarcity and need, as we build up the community of God.

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**2009** *"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...to offer spiritual gifts acceptable to God" --1 Peter 2:5*

What is the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist? I found myself wrestling with this question repeatedly this past summer during my sabbatical leave. I had the great privilege to visit a wide variety of places of worship. Some were massive, ancient, among the most significant places of Christian worship on the planet. The Cathedral Notre Dame de Chartres and the Temple Sagrada Familia in Barcelona are both world heritage sites. The Basilique Notre Dame du Cap at Cap de la Madeleine, Quebec is a major pilgrimage center and home to some of the finest stained glass in North America. We joined hundreds of other people on the days we visited these awesome sacred places. The ancient church of St. Severin was far less populated with visitors. However, dozens of people were visiting this church in the Latin Quarter of Paris, enjoying the mystic ethos. On a humid, hot, and beautiful day, I visited Trinity Episcopal Church in the small town of Apalachicola, Florida. There was only one other person in the church that afternoon. Her name was Dorothy. Fortunately for me she was a member of the altar guild and a life long member of the parish. She gave me her time to show me around this lovely historic parish church. What is the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist? Part of the answer, for me, lies in the relationship between place and people. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary grounds the origin of the word pilgrim, somewhat ironically, in the Latin word for stranger (peregrinus). What impacted me the most on my visits to places of worship large and small, old and new, was encountering people there who had an obvious spiritual sense of place. At Trinity it was Dorothy and her ministry as a member of the Altar Guild. At Madeleine du Cap it was the worshippers participating in the several liturgies

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taking place simultaneously on the grounds. The great cathedrals of Europe have spaces set aside where conversation and cameras are not welcome. Clusters of individuals could be found in such places, some of them appearing very burdened down, sitting in silent prayer and reflection. One of the most moving experiences I had was saying my daily office in one of the small chapels at Chartres Cathedral, and contemplating the many lives that had worshipped in that space over the centuries. Pilgrimage is about finding the connection between God's presence and God's people. I think it is also about accepting the call to offer something from one's self in grateful response to God's presence in one's life. *"Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...to offer spiritual gifts acceptable to God"* Pilgrimage is about setting out as a stranger and arriving as a friend and fellow traveler. It is about setting out in search of something, and returning by way of the path of gratitude and giving. This Thanksgiving, I'm trying to give my original question about tourists and pilgrims a sharper focus still. On the road of life, am I called to be a tourist or a pilgrim? How about you?

*Almighty God, watchful and caring, our source and our end, all that we are and all that we have are yours. Accept us now as we give thanks for St. James, where we come to praise your name, to ask your forgiveness, to know your healing power, to hear your word, and to be nourished by the body and blood of your son. Be present always to guide and judge, to illumine and to bless your people, this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. -Prayer for thanksgiving for a Parish (BAS p. 668)*

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2010 *"The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world and all who live here" (Psalm  
24:1)*

Our afternoon stop is a local winery at the village of Saint Pierre on Ile d'Orleans just outside Quebec City.

*"How long is the growing season here"?*

The attendant pours a taster's sample into my glass as he replies to my question.

*"From about May until the end of September ... we planned to start the harvest this morning; but because of the rain it will have to wait until tomorrow."*

The harvest is the bounty of grapes used to make the offering of wines. The rich red I sampled had a hint of the sacramental. It seemed fitting somehow. Over several days we traveled through the verdant St. Lawrence River Valley. Hay was in the fields, apples and pumpkins were piled high for sale by local growers, the hardwoods had turned brilliant. The length of the St. Lawrence and northern New Brunswick stretched out as a long rich autumn sacrament on either side of the highway. The sacrament was abundant in both produce and history. Cartier and Champlain made first contact here at the birth of New France. First Nations Names like Montagnais and Maliseet are rooted in the countryside. Such are "the people" who had made the survival of the earliest colonists possible.

Thanksgiving in the midst of the bucolic comes easy; but what about life grounded in what we have come to call "infrastructure"? Montreal was as vibrant and energetic as always; but rue St. Catherine was closed for blocks for urban renewal. Above ground was the sound of heavy equipment, jackhammers, and traffic. The construction workers are likely thankful to have work in this economy. Underground the metro hummed and the stations were packed with harried commuters. Scores of students and young workers hurry on to make their stake in the world.

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Out on the streets French and English intermingles with accents from many lands. No doubt some are newcomers thankful to be here. They come bearing their own distinctive gifts at the birth of the future. The growers and farmers of the countryside are likely thankful for the highways and rail lines that move their goods and for the electricity carried on power lines that cross some of the richest farmland on the planet. Concealed above in the afternoon sky are the satellites that link both the office tower and the rural merchant with the whole inhabited world.

I want to resist dividing up the one world that the Creator has given us. Thankfulness is not just about enjoying the view. Thankfulness is an awareness of being part of the great web of life. Thankfulness is being grateful for the labor of others both past and present. Thankfulness is the inquiring and discerning heart that chooses with care the contribution he or she will offer to the world. Jesus described the kingdom of God as a vineyard. It's a parable about God's world and all of us who dwell therein. We are thankful, Lord, to be here.

**2011** *"Set your heart first on God's kingdom and God's goodness, and all things will come to you as a matter of course." --Matthew 6:25 (adapted from the J.B. Philips translation).*

Imagine a church service so badly done that it becomes an inspiration. No doubt a clue to my vintage, I recall the release of the gospel based musical *Godspell*. The notes on the back of the cover of my worn copy of the vinyl recording states it was conceived and directed by John-Michael Tebelak with music and new lyrics by Stephen

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Schwartz. It was years after first hearing *Godspell* that I learned that John-Michael Tebelak derived his inspiration for the musical as the result of a very uninspiring Easter service at an Episcopal cathedral. Several accounts of his story are available. I note the following from a Facebook article "Episcopalians and Others Celebrate the 40th Anniversary of *Godspell*". The article reports "John-Michael was dumbstruck by the utter lack of joy and celebration, noting 'instead of resurrecting Jesus...those people had pushed Him back into the tomb...and refused to let Him come out that day.'" Such was the beginning of the *Godspell* story. Several generations of *Godspell* fans have since come to appreciate the warm, positive, and inspirational musical adaptation of the story of Jesus.

My first introduction to live performance of music from *Godspell* was during Holy Week at a local United Church in the mid 1970s. Decades later I still hear *Godspell* representing traditional material with a sense of joy even in the face of turmoil or adversity. One of the *Godspell* songs is titled "All Good Gifts". The same words are well known to Anglicans from the Rogation Days and Harvest Thanksgiving hymn "*We Plough the Fields and Scatter*."

Sung to either the inspiring music of Stephen Schwartz or to the lovely tune written by Johann Shulz the words proclaim the essence of faithful thanksgiving. "*All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above; then thank the lord, O thank the lord, for all his love.*"

Ours is not a conditional thankfulness dependent on good times and prosperity. Even in difficult and uncertain times we may be thankful because of God's love for God's people. *Godspell* is based on material from Matthew's Gospel. According to St. Matthew, true joy and blessedness comes from being so in love with God that we are moved to act with love for our neighbor. "*Set your Heart first on God's kingdom and God's goodness, and all things will come to you as a matter of course.*" Such are the priorities

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of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims. The message of the kingdom is that the turmoil of the world is not the final word. This Thanksgiving may we respond to the declared priorities of the Kingdom. May the message of the kingdom inspire us to follow Jesus with joyful and thankful hearts.

# THE MILLENNIUM SERMONS

## 2008 *Lent*

The Lenten sermon series is based on The Millennium Goals. The Eight vigil candles burning near the font symbolize the relationship between our faith and our role in the world community. A Millennium Goals static display is located in the narthex.

The Eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

- Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger
- Achieve Universal Primary Education
- Promote Gender equality and empower women
- Reduce Child mortality
- Improve Maternal Health Care
- Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a Global Partnership for Development

What can we do?

- Memorize the Millennium Goals
- Learn about the goals and their progress
- Correspond with your MP about the goals
- Support the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund
- Contribute a question, comment or prayer in the "Goal box" at the static display.

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Think and Pray about the relationship between the Millennium Goals and the following questions in the church's baptismal covenant:

- Will you Seek and serve Christ in other persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

## 2008 *Lent I* *Three Temptations, Eight Millennium goals*

"The Barrens" in Nova Scotia are beautiful but formidable. Whether one looks over the barrens at West Dover near Peggy's Cove, or the Barrens in the Cape Breton Highlands, you are struck by the stark wonder they possess. They are not dwelling places for the unprepared. The Barrens in the North Highlands contain emergency shelters for those who may become caught there unprepared. A Nova Scotia government website describes the ecosystem of our barrens as follows: "Barrens are essentially impoverished habitats, with low nutrient availability and low floral diversity, offering a comparatively small number of niches."

There is life in the barrens. It's not readily visible to the untrained eye. It's life that is tenacious, that literally clings to the rocks and crags. I wonder what spending over a month in one of the barren areas of the province would require? The mere question takes some of the churchly romance out of our understanding of Jesus 40 days in the Judean wilderness. The desert that Jesus sojourned in bears similarities to the barrens. The Canadian Oxford English Dictionary defines a desert as "a dry barren area of land, often sand covered, characteristically desolate, with little

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fresh water and scanty vegetation." There are differences between the two geographic areas for sure. But we get the picture by comparison. It was in a dry and barren land that Jesus prepared himself for bringing the message about renewal of human community.

Why would he choose to go into such a desolate place as part of his formation? There are a couple of reasons. The place was free from the pull and distractions of the social setting he would return to work in. Conversations, parables, debates and controversy will come later. It was in the wilderness that he would have time to focus and prepare for dealing with these in an effective way. Secondly, the kind of life found in the wilderness is a reminder of both the wonder and tenacity of life and our vulnerability within the created order. His ancestors had experienced this during their wandering in the desert centuries before. They discovered that without the bread from heaven and the water from the rock they would not survive physically. They discovered that without the leadership of Moses they would not survive socially. They discovered that without the gift of the law they would not survive spiritually. In the desert they began to understand the importance of each of these elements within their covenant relationship with God. Jesus repeats this exercise for himself as he prepares to bring a message of covenant renewal. Like his ancestors of centuries past, he is tempted externally and internally. Here we see the classical role of Satan in Hebrew scripture, to tempt in the sense of sift and sort and demand choice. Any number of theologians can be cited who understand that the temptations of Jesus are temptations that challenge his relationship to God the Father in covenant Love. [Raymond Brown. *An introduction to the New Testament. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. Doubleday, 1996. p.177*].

I think what is most interesting about the temptations is how powerful they are. For example, according to Matthew the first temptation placed before Jesus is to turn stones into

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bread. I recall a presentation at a clergy gathering when I served in Western Newfoundland. The facilitator brought in some stones from the wilderness. She pointed out how much the stones resembled loaves of bread in their shape and color. What a powerful temptation to place before someone who is "famished". What a powerful temptation to place before someone who is passionate about the hunger of others. Jesus rejects Satan's temptation. Bread alone is not enough. However, he would later perform the miracle of loaves and fishes. It's a miracle that is so important that it is recorded in all four gospels-in one of the Gospels it's recorded twice! We do not live by bread alone. But, Jesus feeds people, describes himself as the bread of life, grounds his memory and presence in a meal of bread and wine, and makes feeding the hungry a standard by which we will be judged in terms of our own moral stewardship. He will respond clearly and decisively to the misunderstanding and controversy that the loaves and fishes miracle created for some. There is little doubt that the temptation of stones for bread gave Jesus focus and perspective. The complex nature of the temptation surfaces with reflection. Something similar can be said of the other two temptations.

Satan fails to drive a wedge between heaven and earth, fails in having Jesus make false choices between one and the other. Jesus leaves behind a geographic environment where life vulnerable. He emerges clear and focused with regard to God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. He re-enters a society where the moral life, (described in the scripture by such terms as justice, righteousness, peace) is equally vulnerable. Being aware of a dependence on God is equally crucial if the kingdom is to be a reality. The temptations of Christ in the wilderness formed him for ministry in the world.

Lent is a time when the church calls us to prepare ourselves for renewing our baptismal covenant. The renewal intended is not merely the reciting of words but the

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renewal of our lives. I'd like to suggest that wrestling with the United Nations Millennium Goals over the next four Sundays in Lent provides an opportunity for us to better understand how God will, as the prayer after communion says, "Lead us in the path of Christ, who is the word of Life."

There are eight Millennium Goals. [See Sunday Leaflet for Feb.10th]. We will have opportunity to set them along side the encounters described in the Gospels over the next four Sundays.

These conversations are rich and layered. We meet Nicodemus, The Samaritan woman, the blind man, and Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus. We will hear again cutting edge conversation. -conversation enables us to connect our faith to our world. These encounters help us understand how to better seek and serve Christ, love our neighbor, and respect human dignity. You may not be able to take this exercise out into the wilds of Nova Scotia (perhaps); but I encourage you to find time and place to ponder what we read and hear. There are three temptations. There are eight Millennium Goals. The common ground between them is the call to discernment and formation with regard to our covenant with God and with our neighbors in the global village.

## 2008 *Lent II* *Encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus:* *Millennium Goals 2 & 4*

What gives a painting its power? An impressionist painting communicates differently than a photograph. In some regards it shows me more. The colors, the perspectives, the subject matter, all contribute to the power of the painting.

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The Gospel readings for the next four Sundays, from St. John, function in a similar way. John tells of encounters between Jesus and others. The conversation in each encounter has an edge -a sharp edge in some instances. The images that inform the conversations give these stories their power.

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is well known. Preachers and evangelists quote the famous verse "you must be born again". It's often repeated as if it is an accusation by Jesus against Nicodemus, and against us. I've often thought that making this kind of "born again theology" the pivot point to be very much like saying that a Van Gogh (painting) is pretty, but kind of "blurry".

Herbert O'Driscoll (1) describes the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus as one of the great encounters of the bible.

There are several powerful elements in the telling of the encounter. I want to draw your attention to just two of them. One is *education*. The story would not be what it is without the premise of education and learning. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. As such his knowledge of scripture and tradition is comprehensive, learned, detailed, simply impeccable. In the story Jesus refers to him, wryly but I think respectfully, as " a teacher in Israel". Nicodemus, in turn, addresses Jesus as rabbi. This is a form of address for Jesus also found elsewhere in John's Gospel. Nicodemus describes Jesus as " a teacher sent from God". His teaching has credibility because it is matched with signs. He "talks the talk", but it has been noticed, he also "walks the walk". The encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus is at Night. Two biblical scholars, PHEME PERKINS (2) and RAYMOND BROWN (3) both note that it is at night that the learned and the wise study the law. It's a night hawk routine that is customary among many scholars. I think Jesus and Nicodemus recognize their common ground. Their passion for their subject matter pours out. They begin to forge a

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relationship of mutual respect. According to John, much of this is based on their learning and education.

A second image, one that is at the forefront of their conversation, is that of birth and *second birth*. The image of rebirth, often flattened out by evangelistic types as "born again", is actually based on a word play that is quite evident in the original Greek. The word "anothen" means both again and from above. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born "anothen". Nicodemus, with tongue in cheek, teases an explanation out of Jesus. How can that work? Aren't we a little too big for that? Jesus suggests that Nicodemus knows perfectly well what is intended. You must be born from above, by the spirit, from God. Theologian C.H. Dodd described the relationship between birth and rebirth in this conversation. (4) The same God who gives and takes away breath in physical life, offers spiritual life. The image is so basic. Through birth we enter the world. Through Christ's birth into the world human beings are offered eternal life. Jesus can count on the knowledge Nicodemus has, aware that Nicodemus can connect the dots immediately.

Here I would like to point out that the birthing image works in both directions. Natural birth is a way of understanding spiritual birth. It works the other way as well. Spiritual birth is offered because each person born is so important to God in the first place. People are born into this world. They have potential. They count for blessings in the eyes of God. They are offered the gift of eternal life. Indeed, the world itself is important. God loves the world. Archbishop Williams Temple, a past Archbishop of Canterbury, said that what is at work here is redemption of the whole world with a scope as wide as God's Love (5). Nicodemus gets it. I know it. Even if the story doesn't come right out and say it at this point. However, Nicodemus will show later that he gets it. As Herbert O'Driscoll reminds us "At what moment this new Nicodemus is born, we do not

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know. But we do know that when our Lord's body was taken down from the cross, it was Nicodemus's arms that received it as it slid towards the ground..." (6)

Let's think about these two images of education and re-birth.

*Education* is such an important value. The result of education is that people can talk with one another more effectively, learn from one another, participate more fully in the economy, broaden their relationships, and deepen their cultural connections with one another. The human mind is a great gift from God. It allows human beings to transcend their immediate surroundings in partnership with one another. Education is one of the ways in which this potential becomes an actual reality. Education, from monasteries to Sunday schools, has been a significant value for the Christianity. Parents labor so that their children might receive an education. I can tell you that in communities populated by laborers, education is worth a sacrifice. A great many coal miners, for example, labored so that their children might get an education and have a better life. Moses Coady identified education as one of the key components of social and economic renewal.

*Millennium Goal Two* is directed toward the achievement of universal primary education. I encourage you to find out how big a challenge this is in our world. According to 2005 United Nations enrollment figures, seventy-two million children who were of age were not enrolled in primary school. In fact, The enrollment figures data is such that this number is likely much higher. This does not include hit and miss primary education as a result of unstable social, political, and economic circumstances. Primary education is just that-primary and basic. So many doors are closed without it.

The word *birth* is a synonym for hope for the future. We speak of an idea being born, or the birth of a new age. Consider the anticipation we invest in the arrival of

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children and grand children. Every development during pregnancy can be the cause of either excitement or anxiety. Spiritual rebirth, understood variously, is one of the central goals of most of the world's religions. The problem is that rebirth is directly related to birth itself. Without being able to thrive after birth, rebirth matters very little. Birth and rebirth, in the Christian tradition, are two interlocking pieces of the mystery of human creation. It is impossible to understand one without the other. St. Irenaeus said, "God's glory is the human person fully alive".

*Reducing child mortality is Millennium Goal Four.* I recall looking over a burial register in one parish I served in, for a period near the turn of the 20th century. There were pages of entries for children who died from illnesses that today are treatable and virtually non-existent in our part of the world. Not so elsewhere on the planet. The UN reports that in 2005 over ten million children on earth died before their fifth birthday. There have been improvements since 2005; but the improvements have been uneven depending on geography and economic class. According to the Millennium Goals Report immunization programs continue to be an extremely important strategy in increasing children's health and in reducing child mortality.

The Millennium Goals give us a framework for relating our faith in God to a world that God loves. God the life giver gives us The Christ. Those whom Christ encounters, he challenges on the basis of all that is life giving. Jesus and Nicodemus shared a religious heritage that was grounded in the value of life, in an understanding of God as the giver of the breath of life. According to John their education in this same religious tradition gave them a basis of establishing a relationship with one another, and exploring the ultimate meaning of human community and human destiny. Is it such a big a leap from the values embedded in the description of their encounter, and our encounter with the values in the Millennium Goals?

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### Endnotes

- (1) Herbert O'Driscoll *The Word Among Us: Year A Vol. 2.* Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1999. P. 21
- (2) Pheme Perkins. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary: Article 61 The Gospel According to John.* Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1990. # 49.
- (3) Raymond Brown *The Gospel According To John.* (i -xii). Doubleday and Company, Garden City, NY. p. 131
- (4) C.H. Dodd *The Interpretation of The Fourth Gospel.* Cambridge University Press, 1953. p. 226
- (5) William Temple *Readings in John's Gospel: Chapters I-XII.* MacMillan and Co., Limited, London, 1943. P. 48
- (6) O'Driscoll. *Ibid.*, p.22

## 2008 *Lent III* *The Woman of Samaria: Millennium goals,* *1,3,& 7*

St. John the Evangelist, had he lived in another time, could have been a great play-right or screenwriter. Any number of biblical commentators have written about the rich scenes, dialogue, speeches and characters that give life to his telling of the good news.

History sets the stage for the meeting between Jesus and the woman of Samaria. Centuries before the birth of Christ the Assyrians conquered ancient Northern Israel. A large portion of the population was deported. Some Israelites were allowed to remain behind. The Assyrians imported colonists into the captured territory from Babylonia. Some colonists and Israelites intermarried. Their descendants were the Samaritans. A troubled history of suspicion and hostility characterized the relationship between Samaritans and Jews of Jesus day.

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Jesus enters Samaria and sits down by a well in the noonday heat. When a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well, Jesus says to her 'Give me a drink'. His terse demand sets the tone for the conversation that follows. The woman replies "How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Her question, about her being both a Samaritan and a woman, is underscored when the disciples return. They are astonished that Jesus is found talking publicly with her. Social norms should prevent Jesus from addressing the woman in public. Did she think him disrespectful? If she were of his own kind, would he be so bold as to address her like this? Was it because she is a Samaritan that he felt he could ask a woman for a drink? She sees he has no cup. Where is the religious sensitivity she has heard about? Surely, he is not going to break the rules of his religion and share her drinking vessel. What is this about? Then the ground of the conversation shifts. Jesus is now offering her water, water that will quench thirst forever. The woman's reply is sardonic. Perhaps there is a roll of the eyes with the sense of 'right, by all means, give me this water, save me the daily trip to this well"

Maybe now she is feeling less threatened. Perhaps this is just a person begging for water, or some sort of preacher, or both. She offers up the information that she has no husband. How do like that situation Mr. preacher of living water! The conversation turns. Her revelation, about the lack of a husband, is a bit risky but factual. Jesus responds with a revelation of his own. A religious conversation ensues, one that overtakes their differences as Jew and Samaritan, male and female. The woman sets down her bucket, perhaps sits on the well, postures relax, history and the Torah are dragged out. It's a long conversation in the heat of the day-long enough for the disciples to return from their errand in town. The end result is the Woman taking a message about Jesus to her community. As biblical scholars PHEME PERKINS (1) and ELISABETH SCHUSSLER FIORENZA (2)

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each point out, the Samaritan woman has become a missionary. The woman departs the stage to go into the village and broker her experience and understanding of Jesus to others. The disciples return. The conversation shifts from water to food. Living water welling up with ease and abundance is joined to the image of a harvest that is bountiful beyond imagination. The difficult and back breaking work of sowing and reaping is replaced by the joy and ease of abundance-just as the daily chore of walking to draw water is ended with water that quenches thirst forever. "The reaper has overtaken the sower; it is the promised age of fulfillment." (3) Food and water here are images for the will of God generously made known in the form of Word, Wisdom and Torah. Now God's will is poured out and lavished abundantly on the whole earth in the person of Jesus the Christ.

The power of water as a symbol here comes from the story's context. A secure supply of available drinkable water is crucial for life in an arid land. As such, it's a powerful symbol in the sense in which Jesus uses it --water "gushing up to eternal" life. May we not rediscover water as a powerful symbol for the sustainability of life? Water plays a key role as an indicator in global warming, pollution, and in the viability of life in the oceans. We in our time are immediately connected (as the people in first century Palestine were) to the crucial importance of water in its relationship to life. Millennium Goal seven is environmental sustainability. Surely those of us who are baptized with water and the Spirit can see the relationship between this goal and a life of discipleship.

Jesus continues the abundance theme moving directly from water to food. Food and feeding are deeply rooted biblical images. What Jesus talks about briefly with his disciples at the well he will expand upon later in John's Gospel. Indeed, he will describe himself as "the bread of life." Yet the lack of abundance of food, often the sharp end

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of the stick of poverty, is as persistent a challenge now as it was in first century Palestine. Along side the divine value of abundance, is the reality of want in the lives of so many. Millennium Goal one is the eradication of poverty and extreme hunger. An estimated 850 million people a day go hungry. Currently 1.1 billion people around the world live on less than a dollar a day.

At the well Jesus invites the Samaritan woman into conversation with his terse plea, "Give me a drink". The cutting edge of this conversation is traced along the lines of gender. The woman of Samaria warily responds to this foreign man and opens to up a conversation that results in her becoming a storyteller about Christ. Those who hear her come to know Christ as the saviour of the world. The title "saviour of the world" was often assigned to the emperor. (4) Here a community has listened to the testimony of this woman and assigns the title to Christ. She is the first of several women in John's Gospel (Mary the sister of Lazarus and Mary Magdalene are others) that have good news to tell. Millennium Goal three is Promote gender equality and empower women. We don't have to look at some distant social setting on the far side of the world to think about the challenge goal three presents. The Samaritan woman nurtures faith. During Epiphany season, I asked members of the congregation to recall those who influenced their faith development. I'm willing to bet that in the majority of cases one of the central influences on your faith was a woman. Sadly, the church has sometimes taken the significant role that women have played in shaping and nurturing the faith of others very much for granted. Michael Valpy, writing in The Globe and Mail recently reported on the decline of the churches in Canada. (I've placed a copy his article on the Millennium Goals display table).

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20071222.wcoessay1222/BNStory>

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Valpy outlines the connection that some sociologists of religion make between the decline in the churches in Canada and the inability of the churches two generations ago to adapt to the evolving roles of women in Canadian society. It would be a fascinating to have a conversation about this issue—a conversation that involves both women who have stayed with the church and those who have left.

Also on the Millennium Goals display table is the mission statement of the International Anglican Women's Network. <http://iawn.anglicancommunion.org/>

The Network reports to the Anglican Consultative Council. The Network is making a very distinctive and insightful contribution to The Anglican Communion. Perhaps, over time, it will grab as much press and as much influence as the gathering of (the mostly male) Primates. Also found there, is material from Anglican Women's Empowerment. Anglican Women's empowerment is being highlighted this Sunday in The Episcopal Church.

[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/eLife\\_insert\\_022408\\_eng\\_lettersize.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/eLife_insert_022408_eng_lettersize.pdf)

The roles and experiences of women around the world are something of a lynch pin with regard to the Millennium Goals. Poverty for example can affect anyone; but poverty remains disproportionately a problem for women and their children. Education access, child mortality, the fight against HIV/AIDS and development partnerships all have special challenges for women. In order to successfully understand and meet the challenges represented by The Millennium Goals, it is necessary to hear about the experiences of women.

The Millennium Goals seek to identify problems facing the Earth and her people with a view to providing the many resources that will be required to resolve them. According to John, in the hottest part of the day, at a well by the side of a roadway, Jesus and the Woman of Samaria encounter one another. They enter into a conversation that culminates

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in an awareness of Jesus Christ as the savior of the world. Throughout their conversation neither Jesus nor The Samaritan woman sets aside who they are as persons. However, during the course of their conversation Jesus and this unnamed woman transcend ethnicity, religious barriers, and gender in order to understand together the grace and the abundance of God. What happens there is not incidental to the gospel. At so many levels, this is the gospel.

### Endnotes

1. Pheme Perkins *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary: Article 61 The Gospel According to John*. Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1990. # 49.
2. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her*. Crossroad, New York, 1994. P.138
3. A.M. Hunter. *According to John*. SCM Press, Ltd., 1968 p. 80
4. Perkins. *Ibid*. #65

## 2008 *Lent IV* *The Healing of the Blind Man: Millennium Goals 5 & 6*

Entertainers sometimes talk about coming to their audiences by way of the miracle of radio or the miracle of television. The term miracle is often used in the purely metaphorical sense. We use it to describe something that amazes us, but something that we can manage or manipulate notwithstanding. What is most interesting about the miracles recorded in scripture is that they have a strong relationship component. They go beyond manipulating things and circumstances in order to manifest Divine love to the people whom God loves. The miracles of Jesus have this strong undeniable relational character about them. Jesus performs miracles that connect people to God,

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reconnect people to their communities. The miracles of Jesus require both recipient and bystander to make choices about how they will relate to God, to Jesus the Christ, and to one another.

The miracles of Jesus function on two levels. First they are a benefit the person who is the recipient of the miracle. Individuals are healed of a variety of illnesses and conditions and restored to a fuller life. At this level, the miracles demonstrate Jesus' love and compassion for the broken and marginalized of this world. Second, the miracles point beyond themselves to something greater. At this level, they are a foretaste of the kingdom. The miracles reveal something of the nature and identity of Jesus Christ. They are grounded in the offer of new life in Christ. The ultimate destiny of God's children is foreshadowed in the miracles of Christ. A miracle is not merely about a temporary change in the circumstances of one person. Rather, it manifests something of how every human being will come to bask in the transforming love of God.

The first of the two main sections of John's Gospel is constructed on the framework of Jesus' miracles. According to John, Jesus performs seven spectacular signs. This morning, we hear about the sixth of these -the gift of sight to the man born blind. The "fall out" from this sign is immense. The miracle itself is described sparingly. But the rich conversation around the miracle is charged with light, as well as no small measure of heat. Let's listen in.

*"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"*

It's a pointed question based on misguided piety. Like so many of the recipients of Jesus' miracles, the blind man suffers a double suffering. *He is blind: He is stigmatized.* His lack of sight defines him in the eyes of others. His condition is blamed on sin --his, his parents, what does it matter. Either he or they have offended God, and so others feel entitled to be offended by him. However, Jesus signals

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that a transformation is about to occur. The man will receive his sight, and with it there will be a revelation for those who are willing to see.

*"Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him".*

The full impact of what Jesus says next, will become clear only later.

*"I am the light of the world."*

It is characteristic of the miracle tradition of Jesus that faith plays a crucial role--before the miracle but afterwards as well. Interesting how faith is required even after the man has received his sight. The blind man is able to see but there is disagreement. Is this the same guy or not? No it can't be. It must be someone who looks like him. The man persists in claiming his identity. Well, if it is really you, how is it that you are now able to see? Where's the faith healer? He doesn't know. The opinion of religious experts is sought out. The conversation takes a very decided turn. We get a sense of why the miracle becomes the object of hostility and suspicion. The religious elite is not able to see in the sighted man, what Jesus saw in him when the man was blind. They cannot see that this person is worthy of the care and blessing of God. Jesus may have removed the covering from the man's eyes, but the opponents of Jesus still insist on stigmatizing him. The man, no longer blind, sticks his fingers directly in the bear cage of hypocrisy.

*"Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man [Jesus] were not from God, he could do nothing."*

Recall the opening question of the disciples and listen to what the opponents of Jesus say to the blind man.

*"You are born in entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?"*

They have him thrown out. Jesus eventually rejoins the conversation. When he does the full impact of what he said earlier becomes apparent. He compares the belief and

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worship of the man once blind to the tunnel vision of his adversaries.

*"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."*

Here a word of caution is in order to we who are listening in on this conversation. As Herbert O'Driscoll notes, "The question asked of Jesus by some Pharisees is an eternal question: *Surely we are not blind, are we?*" (1)

This miracle is a kind of two way street in which the newly sighted man and the opponents of Jesus pass one another heading in different directions. The blind man receives his sight, he becomes enlightened, and he's an example for others to follow. The opponents of Jesus become increasingly hard hearted and entrenched. The newly sighted man begins to cast off his stigma. The opponents of Jesus are shown to suffer from a kind of spiritual astigmatism, a blurry vision in which they over focus on their preconceptions about others, failing to see them as they are in the eyes of God.

Many people on the planet suffer from disease and its consequences. The problems involved in combating disease vary depending on where one looks. Some diseases know no boundaries. Other diseases, while effectively managed in wealthy countries, run rampant in the developing world. Many societies lack the basic resources that in some places the few may take for granted. The scale of disease, both in terms of its prevalence and its social impact, also varies greatly across the Earth. *Millennium Goal Five is improve maternal Health. Millennium Goal Six is Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.*

Canadian Anglicans ought not to be in the dark with regard to the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. Canadian Stephen Lewis has been a clear and informed voice on this issue. His assessment of the pandemic of AIDS in Africa has been widely broadcast in our country. The Primate's Fund made the fight against HIV/AIDS a priority. The distinctive

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ribbon for the campaign against HIV/AIDS has been displayed on our paschal candle here at St. James for the past several years. It is displayed on the candle near the place traditionally set aside for the marks or "stigmata" of the passion of Christ. Today is Lent IV, Mothering Sunday. It is an appropriate day to think about the challenges to maternal health throughout the world. We can be mindful of the work of The Mothers' Union and the MU International fund and the goal of improving life and health for women and families. HIV/AIDS, of course, has taken an awful toll on women and families in Africa.

A number of things will be required to successfully meet the challenges presented in Millennium Goals Five and Six. The problems are gargantuan and require medical, financial, and social resources on a large scale.

Each year

- three million people die of AIDS
- two million people die of TB
- one million people die of Malaria
- 550,000 women die world wide from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.

(Statistics from Lenten Devotional Guide published by Episcopal Relief and Development)

Perhaps a miracle is what is required—a social miracle but a miracle none the less. Here we may want to reflect on the relationship dimension that is part of the Christian miracle tradition. Combating disease and its consequence serves with compassion those who suffer. It also serves to strengthen the common good and enrich our sense of global community. It is so important that we continue to see the common ground we share with others, rather than focusing in on the variables that stunt our ability to identify with them. The reality is that millions of people continue to suffer from terrible diseases, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. The United Nations is now sounding the alarm about the increase of a drug resistant form of tuberculosis.

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A parallel reality is that those who suffer from these diseases also suffer the double suffering of bearing a stigma. It is often difficult to marshal resources for these people because of the stigma attached to them because of their geography, race, poverty, political system, gender, and of course the stigma of disease itself. Like the man born blind, they suffer the double suffering of being stigmatized.

Biblical Scholar Raymond Brown provides a wonderfully comprehensive analysis of today's Gospel. Brown notes the important baptismal application associated with this story. Images of Jesus healing the blind man are found in the catacombs under the ancient city of Rome. The account of Jesus healing the blind man was one of the scripture readings used in the preparation of candidates for baptism in the early Church. The blind man, healed by Jesus, is a symbol of the enlightenment that characterized those who were baptized into Christ Jesus. (2).

According to John, Jesus is the light of the world. He is the true light that enlightens every one. Those baptized into Christ's community of love are enlightened, called to see both God and neighbor with fresh eyes.

Recall that eternal question Herbert O'Driscoll speaks about (above). *Surely we are not blind, are we?* Members of the baptized community are called to be enlightened. The enlightenment of faith lights up our relationship with both God and our neighbor. Our baptismal covenant requires us to promise to respect the dignity of every human being. We can work out that promise in a practical way by reflecting on the Millennium Goals as disciples of Christ. Surely we can see what must be done. Surely we can see clearly the dignity of those with whom it must be done.

### Endnotes

(1) Herbert O'Driscoll *The Word Among Us: Year A Vol. 2.* Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1999. P. 37

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(2) Raymond Brown *The Gospel According To John*. (i-xii). Doubleday and Company, Garden City, NY. pp. 369-382

# 2008 *Lent V* *The Raising of Lazarus: Millennium Goal 8*

Creative writers often make skillful use of foreshadowing. Through the use of foreshadowing an event or development becomes an indicator or portent of something to come. Foreshadowing is a way to enhance meaning and broaden perspective with an economy of words.

According to John, The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the seventh and final miracle that Jesus performs. The story of Lazarus comes at a critical turning point in the Gospel. It comes at the conclusion of the account of the signs or miracles of Jesus. The account of Jesus' impending departure, passion, death and resurrection are about to be told. The account of the raising of Lazarus foreshadows both the resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection which faithful Christians anticipate when history ends and Christ returns.

Biblical scholars make a clear and radical distinction of status between those whom Jesus raises from the dead during his earthly ministry, and Christ's own resurrection. All those whom Jesus raised from the dead will die again. The risen Christ is, of course, as St. Paul tells us the first fruits of those raised to new life. However, it is important not to put too fine a point on this major insight. The amount of time that Lazarus has been dead, his tomb, the stone at the tomb, and the grave clothes are details shared with the account of the resurrection of Christ. We hear in the story that there was a delay in Jesus arriving to save Lazarus from death. The bystanders note that Jesus loved Lazarus.

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The context of the early church is anticipated here. A community grounded in the Love of Jesus, longs for his return while wrestling with the death of beloved members. They await the fulfillment of Christ's promise (recorded earlier in John) that the dead will be called forth from their tombs. This sign that Jesus works foreshadows the hope and faith that is central to the Christian tradition. The raising of Lazarus is not the same as Christ's glorious resurrection, but it anticipates both his resurrection and ours.

C. H. Dodd notes that the theme of this entire episode is resurrection. This theme is highlighted in the conversation between Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus. (1)

As with previous encounters from John's Gospel the conversation around this miracle is highly charged and pregnant with meaning. I want to focus in on just one part of the conversation here. Martha comes out to meet Jesus. She tells him

*"Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died, but even now I know God will give you whatever you ask."*

There is a compact tension in her words. Jesus was not present. Jesus' presence could have prevented the death of her brother. Lazarus is dead. There is a lingering note of hopefulness. Jesus' reply is sparse. In the light of what is to happen next, it is open to interpretation.

*"Your brother will rise again".*

Martha voices the hope of resurrection that she and many other faithful Jews of her time nurtured.

*"I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day."*

Jesus responds with a challenging assertion joined to a very pointed question.

*"I am the resurrection and the life ... do you believe this?"*

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There is a sense in which Martha's reply to Jesus makes the raising of Lazarus itself almost anti-climatic. Before the miracle even occurs, she is the voice of faith and belief. As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza points out Martha's confession of faith is not in response to the miracle, but it is a response to the person of Jesus. (2) Martha replies,

*"I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

Martha is a prototype for every person of Christian faith—a faith in which the place and role of Christ is crucial and central.

Jesus' question and Martha's salient reply, gives rise to a further question for us. It too is a pointed question. *Do the central beliefs of our faith open us up to the world around us?*

Martha confesses faith in the same Christ that was sent, as John tells us earlier, because God so loved the world. Jesus comes into the world from the very heart of the Father. The bond of love unites Jesus and the Father and The Advocate or Holy Spirit. Love joins believers to Christ. Love bonds the community, as St. John understands it. God sends the Christ and pours out love to the World. It is the application of this same love that animates the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria and draws in the people of her community. As we heard in the last piece of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus

*"God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may have life."*

Ted Scott was a Primate of the Canadian Church and an internationally recognized figure on the world stage. Scott believed the authority of Jesus was grounded in the authority of love. "This tough, hard accepting, challenging love, expressed by Jesus Christ ... leads to change, to transformation, to renewal. It is, surely, the energy of the loving God expressed in action." (3)

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Throughout this Lenten series I've attempted to make connections between the Gospel readings, the Millennium Goals, and the life of discipleship. The connection I want to make this morning is more indirect than that attempted in previous weeks. *Millennium Goal Eight is develop a Global Partnership for Development.* Here I want to be clear about two things.

§ First our faith is grounded in the work and the person of Jesus the Christ.

§ Second the confession of our faith should encourage, not inhibit, our partnership with others in working for a better world.

Christians can work in *partnership* with others at a variety of levels (i) with other Christians (ii) with people of other faiths (ii) with all people of good will. Pursuing the values that serve the common good creates opportunities to express our faith in practical ways while building bridges with others. If the challenge of the United Nations Millennium Goals is to be met, it will require a wide variety of effective partnerships. Let me mention just a few that are applicable to us.

The work of *The Primate's World Relief and Development Fund* is one very effective way for Anglicans to partner with others. Our current Primate, Archbishop Fred Hiltz stated this in his New Year's Day sermon. He noted that The Anglican Church of Canada is committed to the Millennium Goals through the Primate's Fund and its partnerships throughout the world. Canadian Anglicans will be working with the Canadian Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches to promote The Goals. He indicates that the Millennium Goals will have an important profile throughout the entire Anglican Communion into the future.

<http://www2.anglican.ca/primate/communications/2008-01-01.htm>

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According to the Report of PWRDF to our most recent General Synod, The Primate's Fund connects us to a variety of effective partnerships that serve advancement of the Millennium Goals. The Primate's Fund has partners in 75 countries, and 25 regional partners in four global regions. These partnerships have focused on micro-credit, food security, and health and human rights.

<http://www.anglican.ca/gs2007/rr/reports/report-16.htm>

The Canadian Context also brings us into partnership with the *Canadian International Development Agency* or CIDA. Canada, like the majority of other nations in world, including the other G-8 nations, has committed itself to the Millennium Goals. The website for this government agency identifies a variety of ways in which Canada strives to participate in partnerships in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals. These include increased aid, greater debt relief, access of affordable essential drugs, market access to Canadian markets, improving availability of new technologies. CIDA is an agency that historically matches funds from The Primate's Fund for development and relief work.

<http://www.acdi->

[cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/acdicida.nsf/En/JUD-1318137-HHX](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/CIDAWEB/acdicida.nsf/En/JUD-1318137-HHX)

Locally, The Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier University has incorporated the Millennium Goals into its work as a participant in the international community. The Coady Institute focuses on education and leadership training as a key ingredient for international development. Leaders from all over the world plug into The Coady Institute to receive education and training. Many of The Coady students are people of faith living in very demanding contexts.

[http://www.coady.stfx.ca/resources/reports/annual/CI\\_Ann\\_Report\\_05.pdf](http://www.coady.stfx.ca/resources/reports/annual/CI_Ann_Report_05.pdf)

The Coady Institute follows in the tradition of The Rev. Dr. Moses Coady. Dr. Coady, like many of his

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contemporaries during the great depression, including members of the Anglican Fellowship for Social Action (AFSA) understood the compatibility of faith with openness to the world.

There is much to do. *There is more to do on the part of our church.* The Canadian Church has endorsed the Millennium goals. PWRDF gives us a vehicle for supporting the goals. However, in providing resources and educational materials to our members in the service of the goals, we lag far behind The Episcopal Church. Our American partners have joined support of the Millennium goals through Episcopal Relief and Development with a variety of educational resources. We can also learn more from our partners elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. A visitor from Manicaland, a partner diocese, recently told some folks here " Don't just send money, come and see us!"

The Raising of Lazarus foreshadows the Resurrection of Christ and the confession of what is central to a Christian faith. The proclamation of this gospel, on the Sunday before Palm Sunday, foreshadows our journey through Holy Week to Easter and life in the baptized community. The gospel reading this morning gives us a clearer insight into the nature of our faith, and the Divine love that is at its core. That same faith will form and shape us for service to God's world in partnership with all that care about the future of the Earth and her people.

### Endnotes

- (1) C.H. Dodd *The Interpretation of The Fourth Gospel*. Cambridge University Press, 1953. Pp. 363-368
- (2) Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her*. Crossroad, New York, 1994. P.328
- (3) Edward W. Scott. "The Authority of Love" in *Authority in the Anglican Communion*. Stephen W. Sykes, ed. Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1987. P. 67

# THE HOMILIES

## ON *RESURRECTION* *Easter Sunday 2009*

*John 20: 17 " My God and Your God ... "*

Every art form tries to exploit its strongest suit in order to get an audience, convey a message, entertain and thrill those who come to the show. One of the strong suits of the motion picture business is the use of special effects. Increasingly sophisticated these days, using cutting edge technology, making use of the big screen, it's one of the reasons many of us continue to prefer to see movies in the theatre. Biblical stories are often good candidates as movie subject matter, because special effects can be used to depict the supernatural events described in the stories. It's an old film, but in it's day the Movie *The Ten Commandments* was the special effects talk of the town. The people of Israel cross the Red Sea flanked by two huge raging columns of water as the sea separated. However, I try and stay away from watching religious movies at this time of year, even though they tend to run and re-run on television during holidays. Special effects are part of the reason. They tend to focus in on the supernatural element while glossing over everything else that the story has to offer us. Whether it's drama like *Jesus of Nazareth* or documentaries about The Shroud of Turin, they focus on how the "supernatural trick" was done --to the detriment of the over all message of the story itself. There is one movie, with a religious theme, that I think is actually a wonderful exception. It's the Canadian and French Movie *Jesus of Montreal*. This award winning

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film was made in 1989. The plot is very interesting. A local pastor hires a group of actors to make a passion play about Jesus. They do this, and in a kind of revolutionary way, end up making a statement about religion and the church that outrages their patrons. What is most interesting about this movie is the parallel and similarities drawn between Jesus and the lead actor Daniel who is hired to play the part of Jesus in the passion play. The movie explores the way in which religious themes impact people, and especially how people are either changed by spirituality or simply dig their heels in and oppose it. The movie has a particularly interesting ending-which I won't spoil for you in case you would like to rent it and watch it sometime. The emphasis is not on supernatural conjuring tricks but on the transformation of people and their lives.

The Gospel for this morning, according to Gospel of John, is a telling of the events of the first Easter morning, "the third day", when Jesus is discovered to have been raised from the dead. Led by Mary from Magdala, pious holy women come to the tomb to pay their respects to Jesus at the place where he has been buried. This is a venerable story from the earliest memories of the Christian tradition. Unlike those of us who gather on Easter day in church, these women came with expectations very different from ours, and without any ideas of resurrection of the dead. Several verses, a very lengthy account by most bible standards, are used to describe the puzzle and problem of what they find there. The tomb is empty, the stone rolled away. Two of the men arrive but there is some confusion still about what it all means. The Gospel writer's interests seem to be very different from those of modern screen writer because the evangelist passes over the opportunity to describe a supernatural spectacle of Jesus bursting from his grave clothes, the stone rolling away, and all that might go with it. (One of the "unofficial" Gospels takes the story in this direction. It was never included in the canon of the

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New Covenant). Peter is puzzled. The other disciple, we are told, believes; but exactly what he believes and to what extent, is more muted. They both go home.

The empty tomb is the scenic backdrop, but the action on stage is in the encounter between Mary and the Risen Christ. Jesus speaks to Mary in three brief fragments. He asks her who she is looking for and then calls her by name so that she recognizes him. He then speaks his one most significant line to her *"Do not cling to me because I have not yet ascended to my father. But go to my brothers and sisters and tell them I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and to your God."* Here the Christ places front and center what is most important, what is most to be remembered, what is most crucial -the powerful decisive and transforming action of God. In a manner that is supported by the earliest preaching of the Christian church, supported in the other readings this morning from Acts and Corinthians, the empty tomb is left behind. The power of God in the lives of God's people drives the plot of the story. It is God's name that is glorified, God who vindicates Jesus, God who raises up the Christ. Jesus must go up and take his place in the bosom of God. It is as the glorified and victorious Lord that Jesus discloses himself to those who see him now through the eyes of faith. A new season opens upon humankind. The emphasis is not so much on the how or the what of the empty tomb. The emphasis is placed on the Divine transformation has been at work in the Christ, and in the lives of those who love him. Mary is asked to decide whether or not she is prepared to let go of the more limiting relationship she has had with Jesus up until now. Will she become among the first to accept transformation in her life that opens her up to the Christ? Will she accept the offer of this relationship with "my father and your father...my God and your God"? Will she allow God to transform her life in this way? Will she be part of a community that, in its most authentic form, brings the

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message of the possibility of life giving change and transformation to the world God loves? Her response is brief; but carries the weight of a newfound faith. Her reply? "I have seen the Lord". Jesus is no longer just "teacher". He is The Christ, He is God's agent, He is Lord of all.

This morning we gather in a familiar place. We know before we come here that the tomb will be empty. We sing familiar hymns filled with familiar imagery about an Easter story that contains no surprise endings for us. It can be lot like watching your favorite movie, say *Casablanca* or *The Ten Commandments* or *Gone with the Wind*. It can be a positive enjoyable experience to tide us over until next time. Hopefully, we can connect with something more than that. Hopefully we can feel, recognize, hear the offer Christ makes to us about a relationship with "my God and your God". Can we not see, beyond and behind the familiar and the expected, the offer from the living God to change and transform our lives? Can we commit ourselves to play a part in changing and transforming God's beautiful world? Can we grasp what the Risen Lord offers us in a renewed relationship with "my God and your God."

## ON TRINITY *Trinity Sunday 2010*

*"All that the Father has is mine ... the Holy Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you." -John 16:15*

This story comes from a colleague of mine, now long retired. He once served for a considerable period of time as a pastor in a small fishing community. As such, he knew just about everyone in the village. He certainly knew everyone who came to church whether frequently or

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infrequently. One Sunday while conducting services, he noticed a "stranger" sitting near the back of the church. When the stranger came up to receive Communion, my friend noticed he was wearing a wool sweater, work pants, and a pair of rubber boots. Perhaps the stranger was a fisherman from the other side of the cove. Perhaps he was visiting one of the families in the village. This particular Sunday was Trinity Sunday. So the sermon was an effort to address the congregation on the subject of the Holy Trinity. When the service ended, my friend went to the back of the church, to the door, to greet worshippers as they left the service. Naturally the stranger in church, having sat close to the back, was one of the first people out the door. He shook the hand of my friend, broke into a broad smile, and without introducing himself said, "Well done father. Very nice heresy you gave us this morning". It turns out that the stranger was not a fisherman, but a new summer resident in the village. He was a retired professor of theology with a Ph.D. from a prestigious divinity school in New England. The comment about the heresy was of course a good natured "inside joke". The inside story is that many clergy do not look forward to preaching about the Trinity. The subject matter is dry. It does not easily lend itself to providing preachers with something for their congregations to take away. If you say too much about the Trinity there is the risk you will simply end up saying something mistaken --- mistakes that the church likes to refer to as "heresy". For instance, The Creed of Athanasius is printed in the back of the Book of Common Prayer. Articles 3 & 4 of this Creed tell us "we worship the Trinity in Unity ... neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance." (Now there is a mouthful!) We are cautioned in talking about God not to "divide the substance", not to make three gods out of one; not to "confuse the persons", not to mix up the father with son with the Holy Spirit and so on.

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It's not just preachers who find the doctrine of the Holy Trinity frustrating. Our fellow faithful in the other religions of Abraham, our brothers and sisters in the Jewish and Islamic faiths, find it very challenging when they hear Christians who claim to be monotheists talk about one God/three persons at the same time. Likewise, faithful adherents of religious traditions that worship more than one God (polytheists) find the notion of the Trinity equally challenging. I once had opportunity to spend a year lecturing on "world religions" for an introductory university class. Over the course of the year I invited members from a variety of faiths to come and discuss their religious tradition with the class. One of the mathematicians on the University faculty was Hindu. He gave the class a very interesting presentation on the divinities of Hinduism. He concluded with the suggestion that the Christian notion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appeared to him to be very similar---a challenging subject indeed!

The big fall back, of course, has been to simply insist that there is one God/three persons and that this must simply be accepted as a *mystery*. Many of you here this morning will likely recall this approach from Sunday school or confirmation class. The Trinity is a mystery. We must accept it as a matter of faith. The term mystery when used in this way is intended to close down the conversation, and paste over the thorny problems that the idea of one in three/three in one creates. However the term mystery can also be a way of opening up the conversation rather than closing it down. The idea of mystery can open us up to God rather than shut us down. The readings for this morning present us with two examples of mystery from this point of view.

It was while studying theology at university that I was introduced to the idea of mystery as something that can be known but cannot be exhaustively explained. A mystery is

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like a deep deep well filled with a seemingly endless supply of water. You can draw off the water you need, but the well itself cannot be drained. There are many of mystery understood in this way from the world around us. Members of the scientific community, for example, can describe, measure, and construct theories about a variety of phenomena while at the same time saying "but we are not sure how that works exactly" or "there are aspects of this that are not yet fully understood." Mystery. The Trinity is a mystery that opens us up to the wonder and awe of the Divine. Its like the hymn *How Great Thou Art*. "O Lord My God when I in awesome wonder ... I scarce can take it in...How Great Thou Art..." The mystery of the trinity understood in this way allows us to be open to a God whose wonder and power exists on a grand scale. The Psalm for this morning reflects this view of things "*O Lord our Governor, how exalted is your name in all the World.*" The power and splendor of God as creator is imagined in just this way in the reading from Proverbs. It is God as inexhaustible mystery that makes belief in God possible and credible in the contemporary world. God as mystery is an antidote to a small diminutive notion of god that cannot be taken seriously in the modern world. One of the problems I have with fundamentalism is that in an attempt to protect "God almighty" it requires us to take too many things literally, reducing God down to an unbelievable size. How could a God who is the author and source of the mystery that is the universe be anything less than such a mystery? Experiencing God as a mystery on a vast and cosmic scale is like experiencing heat and light from a huge energy source. We see the light. We feel the heat. The exact nature of the source remains elusive.

Yet, this is the same God who calls us into relationship, and it is here that we come to know God as mystery from another point of view. This past week in preparing for this morning I re-read an article on the Holy Trinity by Dr.

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Mary M. Schaefer. (Trinitarian Dimensions of Liturgy: National Bulletin on Liturgy Vol. 27 Number 138 Fall 1994.)

Dr. Schaefer once taught here at The Atlantic School of Theology. Her area of expertise is Christian Worship. Dr. Schaefer describes how the modern church has recovered the practice of offering prayer in the name of the Trinity. (p. 137) Today's collect for example has us pray, *"Fill us with a vision of your glory, that we may always praise you, Father Son and Holy Spirit."* Dr. Schaefer writes, *"Mystery surrounds us. We live in its midst. Not only that. We as persons are incomprehensible mystery to one another, even to those who know and love us best."* (p. 155) Human beings are a mystery. You and I are a mystery. Yet we are able to make contact with others, build relationships with others, care for and love others. As we are able to reach into the mystery that is one another, so is God able to welcome us into a relationship with Divine mystery. That is one of the beautiful things we learn from this year's Gospel for Trinity Sunday. *"All that the Father has is mine ... the Holy Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you."* The awesome God calls us into an intimate relationship. This part of John's Gospel, writes Dr. Schaefer *"invites believers to enter into the life of the Trinity, where the three persons interrelate in perfect communion giving to and receiving from one another."* (p. 145)

Trinity Sunday is a call to contemplate the wonder and majesty of the Divine, and opportunity to reflect on the grandeur and majesty of God. We are asked to see God as the mystery from which all creation draws its life, yet who ultimately is not limited by creation despite its vast and wonderful complexity. The traditional name for God as this kind of mystery is the transcendent (totally awesome) God. Trinity Sunday is also a day to be called into a relationship with God, to rejoice as human persons in the created order, to rejoice in the solidarity of Jesus Christ with the human

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condition, to rejoice in the gifts that God the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts for the work of discipleship. The traditional name for God as this kind of mystery is the immanent (intimate) God.

May we accept the challenge to know and experience God-- not as theological problem, a dry and confusing idea, a kind of religious Rubik's cube, or an outdated proposition-- but know and love God as the a Divine mystery that has bonded with the mystery that is humankind.

### **ON** *STEWARDSHIP AND KEEPING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER FOR THE FUTURE* *October 2008*

The theme of my thanksgiving letter is "scarcity and abundance". These days Anglicans in our part of the world find themselves with an abundance of church buildings. Many of our buildings, their size and construction, are built for the needs of a previous era. This situation presents the church as a whole with a number of stewardship challenges that have both financial and moral components. However, it is not a question of simply moving from too many buildings to no buildings. The buildings at St. James require some age related refitting. However, St. James' buildings are in an excellent location and are of comparatively recent construction. They have been well maintained over the years. While it is true that services may be held in just about any location, the sacred space offered by our churches provides us with a rich environment for prayer, reflection and community praise. The environment provided by churches is to a large degree unique. In some cases, the church is sought after as a location for cultural

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events. The loss of churches from our communities would be as unfortunate as the loss of museums, parks, libraries or concert halls. Church hall houses activities and programs for both the congregation and the wider community. They are a resource for building up the congregation. They are used for both fellowship and outreach. In this respect, there is no essential distinction between sacred and secular. Like any resource, the church buildings require good Christian stewardship to maintain and operate.

Our buildings at St. James are matched by the abundance of our endowment funds. Our endowment funds exist at their current level for two reasons (1) the generosity of folks in the past who remembered St. James in their estate planning (2) the gift of time and expertise on the part of successive generations of parishioners in the management of these funds. The parish endowment funds generate income, both interest and dividends, which are an important part of our annual parish revenue every year. The Parish is required by law to use income only from much of our endowment funds. The best management practice for the long haul is to treat all of the endowment funds this way. The more successful we are with the Capital Campaign the more success we will have preventing a draw off our endowment funds with a consequent loss of revenue in the years ahead. The church is home to weddings, funerals, major Church services, regular parish services throughout the church year, times of quiet prayer and reflection. The hall houses the parish meetings, church groups, Sunday school, scouting programs and small community groups in available space. It is a source of rental income. Our buildings serve the needs of the people who gather within them. The Wardens, and the chairs of both the Finance Committee and the Stewardship Committee, join me in encouraging members of St. James to support, according to their means, our Capital Campaign.

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The Campaign will ensure we have facilities for ministry into the future.

### ON *REFUGEES* *Diocesan Synod 2011*

*Note: This presentation was given at Diocesan Synod, May 28th 2011. The presentation was part of a synod theme intended to help synod delegates make the connection between the local churches with the wider world.*

Good Morning.

Bishop Sue [Moxley] invited me to give a short presentation this morning, describing how the experience of refugee sponsorship has impacted our parish.

On September 30th, 2010 our sponsorship group "Partners for Refugees" greeted the Al-Ali family at Halifax airport. The arrival of the Al Ali family, Jamal and his wife Kawla and their two young adult daughters Ruah and As'ma came after a long and difficult stay at a United Nations Refugee camp in Syria.

Our arrival at the airport as their sponsors came as the result of a very different kind of journey. What was required was a commitment of one year and funding of just over \$26,000 over the course of that year. Our Parish Council initially, tepidly, agreed to participate. Six months later we found ourselves at the airport greeting this family from the other side of the planet. We were there as members of "Partners for Refugees" staffed mostly by people from St. James and St. Mark's, Gottingen St. (they had done this before). Funding and other tangible support came from a consortium of parishes from Chebucto, Ft. Sackville, and eventually Dartmouth Regions together with

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our diocese and The Primate's Fund. When we arrived at the airport we were in the company of people from the other sponsorship groups. They had already sponsored other members of the Al-Ali's extended family. We were joined as well by members of that extended family. There is time this morning to recount only a few of moments of our transformative journey as sponsors.

### ***Stewardship Moments***

At the outset a member of our Parish Council encouraged us to raise funds for sponsorship by appealing directly to parishioners. He supported his suggestion by immediately declaring how much of his own money he would contribute. He was invited to make an appeal directly to members of the parish at both of our services the following Sunday. Within a week we had over seven thousand dollars in hand.

A faithful member of our parish volunteered to chair Partners. As the work has unfolded we have discovered in her a depth of commitment, and wealth of experience with social services, and leadership abilities that have proven invaluable. How could we have not known this about her before?

### ***Outreach***

We found out that the Halifax Immigration Settlement and Integration Service or ISIS is in our neighborhood literally on our doorstep.

We met members of the Middle Eastern Community who were elicited to help with translation and cultural issues. Thus was opened up to us a whole new level of awareness about the Middle Eastern community who are such a significant part of our city.

We have gotten to know and work with other Anglicans like those from St. Mark's, and learned things from them.

Members of Partners heard first hand about the terror and loss that are part of the lives of so many dislocated people.

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### *Evangelism*

On Christmas Eve the Al Ali family asked to attend a church service. A couple from our parish that has spent a lot of time with them agreed to bring them (They had been to St. James once prior, but after church for coffee hour). It being Christmas I made the usual invitation that those who are baptized are welcome to receive communion if they wish. That of course was lost on people who did not speak much English and in the midst of the liturgical chaos of the Christmas family service. As the distribution of communion began, one of the Al Ali family members asked their hosts about what we were doing. They explained that we believe that the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Jesus. The members of the refugee family were determined to come up for communion. They had to compromise of course. They could not receive the wine because of their Islamic beliefs; but neither could they see themselves refraining from participating in what we their sponsors appeared to be offering them. It wasn't about making them Anglicans. It was about how they and we tried to find a way to celebrate the common ground we were now standing upon. It was a kind of Book of Acts moment in which people from two distinct groups try to navigate different backgrounds with theological smoothing after the fact.

Two years ago our Parish Council invited The Rev. David Hart from Bedford United Church to give a presentation on congregational development. One of the many experiences David shared with us was "take on an outreach project that is almost too big to handle". This project has validated that advice.

Our chairperson notes: "I can honestly say that stepping up to help Chair the group has been a blessing. Not only have I enjoyed meeting the family and feeling like a good steward of the parish by assisting this family that had to live in desperate conditions but also it provided me the

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opportunity to get to know many members of St. James that I only knew "to see" at church. I felt like this opportunity has helped forge great relationships with others who attend St. James. I am proud to tell others about the work that PFR are doing and what a benefit it is to our [sponsored family]".

One member of the couple who took the Al Ali family to church shared this: "Working with Al-Ali family has been a very rewarding experience for both [of us]. Being able to help in some small way with a family who have through no fault of their own have lost everything, their home and country and have lost physical contact with other family members. Helping them settle in Halifax makes you appreciate what you have even more."

And one of our members from St. Mark's states: "Several parishioners have joined KAIROS as a result of their familiarity now with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and will be involved as we work for a just resolution to this very serious issue. They attend local meetings and lectures to spread accurate and valid information to the Canadian public."

### ***Prophetic Moments***

There have been challenges. There have been frustrations on both sides dealing with cultural barriers and culture shock. There are some who feel that refugees are lucky to have been sponsored to come to a country like Canada. However as this article on the Iraq war from American National Public Radio states, the circumstances that create refugees are often not well understood here.

"When the United States invaded Iraq ...it didn't set out to deepen the Sunni-Shia divide in the Islamic world. But that may be one of the most important outcomes of the war. American leaders told the nation and the world that the Iraqis would view the United States as liberators, not occupiers, that the war would be over quickly, and that Iraq would return to peace. Those rosy predictions did not take

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into account the frequently violent and tragic history of Iraq, especially the aspirations of Iraq's often brutalized Shiite majority, says Augustus Norton, professor of Middle East history at Boston University."

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7411762>

We are learning now that while the Canadian government did not publicly support the Invasion of Iraq, the government of the day did lend military support to the effort covertly. Our country was not an open participant in the coalition of the willing--just an active behind the scenes secret admirer of it. In actual fact, the Al Ali-family had to flee Iraq because of the social destabilization caused by the Invasion. As ethnic Palestinian Sunni Muslims they became targets for deadly violence when Saddam was toppled. People like the Al-ali family are here in part because of the policies in which our country has been complicit. Luck has little to do with it.

My favorite biblical writer from all of sacred scripture is the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is essentially good news. St. Luke certainly thought so. He casts the preaching of Jesus and the character of Jesus' disciples against the standard of Isaiah's proclamation.

*"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me....to bring good news to the oppressed...to proclaim the year of the Lord's Favour." -Is. 60:1-2*

Refugee sponsorship has enabled we the sponsors to incarnate Isaiah's word of good news. We have helped other people in need participate in a measure of jubilee. We have helped free others from a kind of captivity.

However, Isaiah was writing for, to, and about victims. For Isaiah the exiles of ancient Israel not only receive good news, but as oppressed people they would herald it for others. So there is, I think, is a parallel layer of application of Isaiah for those of us who involved in refugee sponsorship. It is refugees, folks like the Al-Ali family,

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who have been anointed by God. They have come to Canada and our to community to bring us good news about the possibility of social justice. They have given us an opportunity to be released from the captivity of our Country's mistakes in the international community. They have given us an opportunity to do what Jesus has asked us to do, and in so doing they have afforded us an opportunity to participate in Jubilee not as mere givers. Our sponsorship of this family has made us recipients and beneficiaries of what is at the core of our own religious heritage as disciples of Jesus.

### ON *MINIMALISM : A MINIMILAST'S LENT* *Lent III 2012*

*Ex. 20: 1-17*

*I Cor. 1: 18-25*

*Jn. 2: 13-22*

Mark Bittman is a renowned food journalist whose columns appeared in the New York Times for a number of years. I have here a one of Bittman's recipes for "The simplest Roast Chicken". At the bottom of the recipe Mr. Bittman writes, "...*roast chicken is almost infinitely variable. But at its simplest, with only salt, pepper, and olive oil, it's really really good. Add an herb sprig or a clove of garlic, or both, for excitement.*" [Note 1].

A key word here is "simplest". He shared recipes that contained a few ingredients coupled with simple steps for preparation. Appropriately, Mr. Bittman's NYT columns were titled "*The Minimalist*". A minimalist is one who focuses on the basic and the essential in order to create a meaningful experience. In this case, he shares a recipe for

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simple roast chicken that is "very, very good". Perhaps you remember the Disney production "The Jungle Book". There, a singing-dancing bear sings, " give me the bare necessities of life..." A minimalist.

*Minimalism* is used in a technical way in art and architecture. One may decorate a room, for example, from a minimalist perspective. Sparsely furnished, with limited though perhaps contrasting colors, modest window hangings, taken together accentuate the floor space and natural lighting of a room in an engaging manner.

The Story of Jesus "cleansing" the temple has always captivated me. It is an important and virtually unique episode in the ministry of Jesus. It's important because it is recorded in all four Gospels. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke describe this event as taking place very late in the ministry of Jesus. These three Gospel writers share the view that this incident is a "trigger event" which puts in motion the opposition to Jesus and seals the decision to have him arrested. According to John, this charged event happens much earlier. It sets a tone of tension and conflict in a way that will inform the debates that Jesus has with his opponents throughout the remainder of the Gospel. What is unique about this event is the way in which it shows Jesus engaging in demonstrative action. We see a side of Jesus here not so well seen in his parables, discourses, or even his miracles. We see a passionate, prophetic, even irascible Jesus. His confrontation in the temple highlights the level and intensity of the conflict between him and his opponents. It is at the temple, a national sacred site, during a pilgrim festival, with other devout Jews from all over the known world, that Jesus shows his activist side. The temple was to be a place where all Jews could participate in sacrificial worship as a part of the Covenant relationship with God. Yet as pilgrims are confronted with changing their various currencies into temple currency, and seeking to purchase an animal for

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sacrifice, they find a religious institution that is overburdened and perhaps marked by corruption. Jesus responds. There is a cautionary note here for Christians, as well. The church often creates barriers and impediments for people that hinder their relationship with God.

The story of Jesus confrontation in the temple is a story about *political minimalism*. Here Jesus acts in a way consistent with his preaching. He acts as a reformer who wants to cut through the overburden and get to the essential aspects of *The Covenant*. Jesus emphasizes the basic importance of a relationship between God and God's People together with the core values of faith, righteousness, mercy, and compassion. The story of Jesus confrontation in the temple, according to John, holds up two very basic key components from a minimalist perspective.

- *The importance of a faithful relationship with a God who is available to God's people.*
- *The central significance of Jesus as a location for the presence of God, making God available to all people through the death and resurrection of the Christ.*

St. Paul has a similar minimalist perspective in today's second reading. "*We proclaim Christ crucified...*" Paul writes. This is a crucial minimalist proclamation not clouded by philosophical sidebars or respectability issues.

The minimalist approach can be compelling when looking at any number of aspects of our faith tradition. The reading from the *Hebrew Scriptures* this morning, for instance, is one of two accounts of the Decalogue or "Ten Commandments." *The Commandments* are grounded in the Law—the law that devout Jews understand as life giving. The Ten Commandments have often not fared very well when they have been taken over by Christians. We memorize them, put them on stone plaques in our churches; but we have also taken them out of context, failed to heed them as a call away from idolatry and toward justice. We

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have at times reduced them to a bland harmless checklist of personal "does and don'ts". *It's the careful difference between being a minimalist and losing something completely by taking it out of context.*

Looking at the commandments through minimalist eyes, we may see them as stark but bold facets of our relationships with both God and Neighbor. They are a call, not just to keep the rules but to, as Jesus pointed out, love God with all our heart, and act towards our neighbors with a love for justice.

In preparing for this morning, I came across an article on the Ten Commandments by *Rabbi Rami Shapiro*. As I read this to you, see if you can identify each of the Ten in turn [Note 2].

It's interesting that here Rabbi Shapiro draws on the Jewish tradition as well as the Vietnamese Zen tradition. It's a minimalist perspective. I would suggest it is also one that commends itself to faithful followers of Jesus.

*Lent* is a season that demands reflection upon a lean, stripped down, essential Christian faith. The readings for this morning confront us with a Christ who shows to us, and demands from us, the essentials in our relationship with God, with Christ, with neighbor, and with the society around us.

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### Notes

#### **1** *SIMPLEST ROAST CHICKEN* By *Mark Bittman*

<http://dinersjournal.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/the-minimalist-simplest-roast-chicken/?ref=theminimalist>

Yield 4 servings

Time 50 to 60 minutes

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### *Ingredients*

1 whole chicken, 3 to 4 pounds, trimmed of excess fat  
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

### *Method*

1. Put a cast-iron skillet on a low rack in the oven and heat the oven to 500 degrees. Rub the chicken all over with the oil and sprinkle it generously with salt and pepper.
2. When the oven and skillet are hot, carefully put the chicken in the skillet, breast side up. Roast for 15 minutes, then turn the oven temperature down to 350 degrees. Continue to roast until the bird is golden brown and an instant-read thermometer inserted into the meaty part of the thigh reads 155 to 165 degrees.
3. Tip the pan to let the juices flow from the chicken's cavity into the pan. Transfer the chicken to a platter and let it rest for at least 5 minutes. Carve and serve.

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## 2 *RABBI RAMI SHAPIRO TAKES ON THE TEN* *COMMANDMENTS*

<http://susancorso.com/seedsforsanctuary/?p=1064>

1. God is the source of liberation. Aware of the suffering caused by enslavement to things and ideas, I vow to free myself from all additions and compulsive behaviors, both material and spiritual.
2. God cannot be named. Aware of the suffering caused by gods created in our own image for our own profit, I vow to recognize all ideas about God as productions of human beings, bound by history and circumstance, and forever incapable of defining the Reality Beyond Naming.
3. God cannot be owned. Aware of the suffering caused by the misuse of God and religion in the quest of power, I

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- vow to liberate myself from all ideologies that demonize others, and to honor only those teachings that uphold the freedom and dignity of woman, man, and nature.
4. Remember the Sabbath. Aware of the suffering caused by slavish attachment to work, consumption, and technology, I vow to set aside the Sabbath as a day of personal freedom, creativity, and play.
  5. Honor your parents. Aware of the suffering caused by old age, I vow to care for my parents to the best of my ability and to promote the dignity and well-being of all elderly people.
  6. Do not murder. Aware of the suffering caused by the wanton destruction of life, I vow to cultivate respect and gentleness toward all beings.
  7. Avoid sexual misconduct. Aware of the suffering caused by sexual irresponsibility, I vow to honor human sexuality and never degrade it through violence, ignorance, selfishness, or deceit.
  8. Do not steal. Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, injustice, theft, and oppression, I vow to respect the property of others, to work for the just sharing of resources, and to cultivate generosity in myself and my community.
  9. Do not lie. Aware of the suffering caused by harmful speech, I vow to speak truthfully and with compassion, to avoid gossip and slander, and to refrain from uttering words that cause needless division or discord.
  10. Do not covet. Aware of the suffering caused by endless desire, I vow to live simply and avoid debt, to enjoy what I have before seeking to have more, and to labor for what I desire, honestly and justly.

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### ON *ALL SOULS CHAPEL AND COLUMBARIUM* *All Saints Sunday 2001*

I have been asked to reflect upon the significance of both stained glass art and the pastoral role of All Souls Columbarium for our parish.

Our modern world often measures the value of art primarily in monetary terms. The skill of the artist and the beauty of a particular piece of art are certainly important in a Christian setting; however, skill and beauty also work to glorify God and teach us something about the content of our faith.

Since ancient times many forms of art have been used to instruct the faithful about the events of salvation history, the person and works of Christ, and the saints of the Church. Stained glass functions as a "visual aid" in the service of Christian education and devotion. It speaks to us in a way that language cannot.

Consider the messages in the windows being dedicated today: Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, or more generously, the source and completion of our life in God.

The windows around the niches display a message about the trust we may place in God. The Tree of Life found in the opening and closing books of scripture, is about the divine desire and destiny for the people of God. The Rainbow, in the covenant with Noah, illuminates God's promise to the whole inhabited world.

The Dove is a powerful symbol of the life giving spirit that recreates us in our baptism. The Lion and Lamb are the showing of a God who calls us into the reconciliation and peace of the age to come.

The Resurrection Morning window bids us witness to a bold faith and a confident hope. Madonna and Child radiate the love that causes heaven and earth to be joined in

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the word made flesh. Ruth and Naomi mirror in the faithfulness of God in faithfulness of human relationships.

In recent years the first service of the resurrection, the Easter Vigil, is celebrated in All Souls Chapel. At that time the message "Christ is Risen" is proclaimed anew. This morning we dedicate these new windows, along with other memorials and appointments noted elsewhere in this leaflet.

These new additions, together with the Light of the World and the St. James windows, and the unseen but ever heard prayers of generations past and present, adorn and edify the setting for the Easter message: "Christ is Risen".

This message is the hope of all who rest in the Columbarium. May the message, and this place, be of comfort to all who come to worship, to pray, and to linger to reflect in the Chapel of All Souls.

## ON *CREATION MURAL* *April 2005*

St. Paul tells us that in Christ we are a new creation. It is wonderfully appropriate that the ten east windows were installed in time for Easter Day. It is anticipated that the ten west windows will be installed about the end of April. Once all twenty windows are installed, St. James will provide parishioners and visitors alike with an inspiring mural on the theme of creation. The mural will provide the opportunity for prayerful contemplation on the nature of creation from perspectives that are biblical, Christian, contemporary. The relationship of faith to creation is one of the major areas of study and interest in contemporary spirituality. Indeed, the Episcopal (Anglican) Church in the United States has recently published a catechism on the subject of faith and creation. Our project is innovative.

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The windows are of a very high quality and do justice to St. James as a place of worship. St. James continues to take its place as a church that is a patron to the arts. I noticed many people exploring the windows during Holy Week. Please take time to invite your friends to come and see as well. Questions about the windows, including interest in sponsoring remaining windows in whole or in part, may be addressed to any member of the Stained Glass Window Committee.

## ON *PARISH COMMUNITY I* 2005

*"...You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God ..." I Peter 2:9*

There are various ways to define a church. Anglicans are familiar with the concept of the "parish church". The parish church serves a particular area. All who live within that area may look to that church with some sense of belonging. A second way to understand a church is as a congregation. Faithful people come together, or congregate, in a particular church in which they have made a connection with others in the spiritual life.

St. James Parish is comprised of people who are here by a variety of routes. For some, St. James has been their historical parish church for a great many years. For others, St. James has become a church home because of the warm invitation and offer of fellowship from others.

No matter how people may have found their way to St. James, the particular talents and strengths of each individual and family are part of the ministry of all God's people in this place. This parish directory is one way in

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which we get to know one another, and our parish community, a little better. May God bless us in our common task of building up the people of God.

### ON *PARISH COMMUNITY II* 2011

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3)*

Has it been that long? Yes, it has been over five years since our parish compiled its first parish directory back in 2005. Five years in the life of any dynamic community often brings significant change. St. James is no exception. Some of the faithful members of our congregation who graced the pages of our first Photodirectory have been called home to be with the Lord. Others have responded to the call of their work place or other major lifestyle changes. We remain grateful for the legacy of their contributions to the life of our parish.

Yet among the blessings that flow from the source of all blessings is the continuous renewal of our community. Over the past five years our parish has been blessed by the addition of new members who have come to share in the life of the parish community. New faces bring the blessing of new personalities, additional gifts, and unique contributions in order to build up the household of God in this place.

No matter how or when you have found your way to St. James, the talents and blessings that are distinctively yours as a child of God enrich our common life. As you explore the pages of our new 2011 Parish directory, I encourage

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you to give thanks for one another, and for the wealth of blessing that each person brings to our local community of faith. What's more, I encourage you to use the photographs in this directory as a tool for building relationships with one another. Match up the faces and names you find herein with a personal introduction of your own.

God has blessed us in Christ with a vibrant parish community. May that blessing grow in us as we walk together with Jesus who is our greatest blessing.

# THE POSTCARDS

## FROM *CHARTRES CATHEDRAL* *June 20, 2009*

Our first major stop was Chartres Cathedral. It is one of the most important sites for stain glass. We took a tour from the famous Malcolm Miller. He told us that the Cathedral is like a library. You cannot read all the information in one visit. I was overwhelmed by the immense amount of glass and the many stories it depicts from the Scriptures. One of the oldest windows depicts a "Jesse Tree" or the family tree of Christ. Mr. Miller showed us one window that combines the story of Adam and Eve with the parable of the good Samaritan. The two together give a complete account of creation, fall and redemption all in one window. The Cathedral was built to attract pilgrims. Today as a UNESCO world heritage site it attracts both pilgrims and tourists. The visit was a very moving spiritual and educational experience.

## FROM *PARIS* *June 22, 2009*

We thought of you yesterday morning as Wendy & I worshipped at The American (Episcopal) Cathedral and enjoyed coffee hour afterwards (Blvd. George V). The Eucharist was attended by several hundred people. The afternoon we visited the Musee D'Orsay and saw lovely

## Postcards

impressionist paintings. The days previous we visited several churches in the city. St. Severin is most moving. Each of the churches displays stain glass and art over many centuries. As I walked the interior of the churches, I realized that there is probably a property committee somewhere that frets over the operation and up keep of these massive ancient buildings. However, when you see among the tourists, people who have come into the church to pray quietly, some looking very burdened down, and that people have been doing such for hundreds of years, it puts the practical in perspective. I was reminded that sacred places cannot be understood only from a practical view point.

The visit to the Louvre was very overwhelming. We spent seven hours there! I focused on three displays: Ancient Mesopotamia--the cradle of civilization; The middle ages; and French, Italian and Spanish paintings with biblical themes. From large tapestries to smaller objects like chalices no item is too small to represent the stories of the bible. Wendy & I have, of course, visited all of the sites that tourists come to see here. It has been interesting to talk with folks from North America who have lived here for many decades

## FROM *SAGRADA FAMILIA* June 26, 2009

We have visited the Sagrada Família in Barcelona. It is an amazing building. I was fortunate to have had the chance to talk with Ernie Clarke before our departure about the Sagrada. The twentieth century Cathedral rises up out of Barcelona like a huge sand castle. It looks more like a massive carving than a man made structure. The architect

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Gaudí drew on his love of nature in designing the building, and the natural environment of this area is evident everywhere in this place of worship. The interior celebrates light, like huge beautiful forest. In many ways, the outside with the story telling portals are the most magnificent aspect. Having seen many of the classical buildings here, you realize what a huge creative leap Gaudí made with Sagrada. As I looked at the biblical stories presented on the outside portals, complete in detail, I realize that the building is also very verbal. One would need a person familiar with the Christian story to interpret.

Such is the case with all the visual presentations from any era. The weather here has been hot and sunny but with lovely cooling breezes. Wendy and I have enjoyed walking the outdoors.

## FROM *BARCELONA* July 3, 2009

On Sunday June 28th we attended the liturgy at Sant Pau del Camp. We visited the church to see the architecture a few days earlier. This is the oldest church in Barcelona. Located just around the corner from our accommodation, the interior of this lovely ancient parish church has a very meditative feel. It is difficult to believe that this church that is now surrounded by the city of Barcelona was originally surrounded by farmland. According to tradition, St. Paul managed a visit to this general area. The liturgy was in Catalan, a very interesting dialect spoken here in Catalunya.

We also visited Santa Maria del Mar with its interesting Catalan-Gothic architecture. A wedding was taking place at the time of our visit. We tourists sat quietly in the back

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until the wedding concluded. The liturgy at St. Pau and the wedding at St. Maria were reminders of the participation of faithful people in these sacred places over the centuries.

We had opportunity on June 29th to enjoy two wonderful vistas of Barcelona. First we saw the city and the bustling port of Barcelona from the historic but sometime infamous Montjuic Castle. The Castle that was used at times as a prison during the rebellion of 1909 and during the Franco regime, will soon host The International Centre for Peace. Later the same day we saw Barcelona from the heights of Park Guell --another example of the creative work of Antoni Gaudi (see Sagrada Familia in our earlier posting). We admired the splendid Gaudi designs. Live classical Spanish guitar music greeted visitors beneath one of Gaudi's terraces. The day as a whole was a kind of metaphor for every society. I thought of the need to remember the past and the sacrifices of previous generations (Montjuic Castle) while anticipating the future with hope and vision (Park Guell). It is difficult to leave this fabulous weather and this exciting city. Tomorrow we head back to North America and journey to Philadelphia.

## FROM AMERICA July 13, 2009

Wendy and I have just completed visits to Philadelphia; Richmond, Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina. The weather has been hot and lovely. We took opportunity to visit some significant historic sites. In Philadelphia we visited Independence Hall and Congress Hall. We also spent a morning at Valley Forge National Historic Park. In addition to the historic importance of Valley Forge, the landscape and scenery in and around the Park is beautiful.

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The churches in the areas visited were of special interest as part of my sabbatical program. Historic St. Joseph's Mission and old St. Mary's Church (both in Philadelphia) have a strong old world feel inside. The stain glass, art work, and subdued lighting give a strong sense of sacred presence. In the same neighborhood as these two churches, The Episcopal Church has converted one of its old churches into a center for Episcopal Social Services. In fact, several of the churches here seem to have very visible outreach ministries.

One of the most interesting studies in contrast to many of the churches visited is Christ Church, Philadelphia. The building is an outstanding example of period church architecture. There is no stain glass in the church. Natural light pours in through the many clear windows. The pulpit stands out in the sanctuary area and is decorated with an IHS symbol. A number of tablets mounted on the walls commemorate both clergy and laity who were part of Christ Church heritage. As I stood inside the building and reflected on the architecture and historical and political heritage, I thought how well the place reflected the enlightenment. It has been most interesting to see the connection made between church buildings and the historic political heritage of America. For example Washington Memorial chapel at Valley Forge contains a wealth of stain glass. Much of the story told in the windows is about Washington and the themes of American Independence.

We also visited St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond Virginia where we enjoyed a fascinating personal tour of the church and its connection, once again, with the period of the American Revolution. It was in St. John's that gave the pivotal `give me liberty or give me death` speech. In Charleston we did a walking tour of the historic section. It was evening and the church buildings on the tour were closed. We did get to admire St. Michael's Episcopal Church as well as the ``French church`` which

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contains the last Huguenot congregation in the United States.

I'm now heading into the remaining half of the sabbatical to do writing and reflecting. We look forward to seeing everyone at St. James, Armdale upon return to parish duties the first weekend of September. Please know that the parish continues to be in my thoughts and prayers.

# THE AUTHOR

The Reverend Canon Rod Gillis

## EDUCATION

*Bachelor of Arts* (Theology major) – St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia 1975

*Master of Divinity* – Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia 1978

## ORDINATIONS

*Deacon* – Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, June 3, 1977

*Priest* – Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, June 29, 1978

## PARISH SERVICE

*Rector* – St. James Armdale, Halifax, August 1998-May 2012

*Rector* – St. John the Baptist, North Sydney, January 1993-July 1998

*Rector* – St. James, Mahone Bay with Maitland, August 1988 to December 1992

*Rector* – St. Michael and All Angels, Cornerbrook, Diocese of Western Newfoundland, September 1986-July 1988

*Rector* – Parish of French Village, July 1982-September 1986

*Rector* – Parish of Neil's Harbour, November 1979-June 1982

*Curate* – Holy Trinity, Bridgewater with Conquerall, May 1978-October 1979

*Deacon* (student) – Emmanuel Spryfield, Halifax, May 1977-April 1978