

After all the fuss of Christmas, it's good to take a breather! The preparations for the weekend, all the activities and excitement seem to fade into the malaise of an Australian summer that is both as predictably unpredictable and varied as anyone could imagine. Heat, humidity, fog, cold, drizzle, sun—yes, we're getting it all, and it is easy to sit back and relax.

Or am I imaging things? For the Church, this is one of the peak Holy-Day periods. Every day, there is something happening as we continue through the 12 days of Christmas. Yes, there are really 12, and the 12<sup>th</sup> night is still to come! A quick look at the calendar for this time of year shows that the Church should be continually active, even though our topical and sometimes tropical weather lolls us into a sense of post-Christmas sobriety.

Boxing Day, also known in Melbourne as the Feast of the Ashes, is actually the Feast of St Stephen, the first martyr. There's no secret that for me, this is a significant feast to keep. The proto-martyr was a deacon who died defending the faith and feeding the poor. Over my lifetime, churches under the patronage of St Stephen have been significant. I was baptised at St Stephen's, Penguin; I served as a curate at St Stephen's Wynyard and Smithton; and more recently as vicar of St Stephen's, Richmond.

The next day is the Feast of St John, apostle and evangelist. He is the only apostle whose death is unknown. Could it be that the ending of the gospel bearing his name, in chapter 21, could suggest that he was assumed, or still with us? We know he was certainly the longest living, and his Revelation when on Patmos is still an area of some concern in the Church. Is it a history told in apocalyptic terms, prophecy, or both? Whatever take you have on it, it certainly proclaims the most important message that we are in the post-resurrection time in which the victory of Christ has been proclaimed, and we wait for the fulfillment of the ages.

Then, there is an abrupt change of gears. We return to the Christmas narrative, but some 18 months on. We recall the slaughter of the innocents of Bethlehem under the order of Herod. Today, we pay a nod to this atrocity in the singing of the carol *Unto us a boy is born*. This led to the Holy Family, whose feast we celebrate today, leaving Bethlehem and journeying out of Egypt into Nazareth.

Thomas Becket rounds out the first week with the remembrance of his martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral. Standing at the sight of his martyrdom was, for me, rather cathartic. The stylised daggers pointing to the spot, the prie-dieu for pilgrims to kneel in prayer; and the well-worn step leading to the former Shrine of Thomas was actually quite confronting. Running up the Dean's steps and into the Cathedral from the old monastery, it was there that Thomas went from being the turbulent priest of Henry II, to the most significant martyr of the Anglican Church.<sup>1</sup>

Today, we turn our focus back to the Holy Family. It is often said that Christmas is about families. For many, this is true. I've marvelled at the many accounts of huge dinners and gatherings that have occurred in this district alone over the past few weeks! Cooking, in one case, for up to 60 people: truly, family is at the centre of the celebration. It is a time to gather together and celebrate in love and like Jesus himself later would do, over a good party.

For others, it is a time to simply rest; for others, it highlights separateness and loneliness. There is no doubt for some in our community, this time of year is extremely challenging. As one who is separated from my family by a big ditch called Bass Strait, I thank you for allowing me to be part of your celebration. I enjoyed a cold Christmas lunch at a picnic at Sanatorium Lake, seated next to a very warm barbeque! It was quite a change of pace for me, and one that I appreciated. My thoughts did wander back to the 230 who gathered for lunch at the Food Centre in Richmond. I wonder if my favourite guest of the past 9 Christmases bought himself a new and appropriate dress for the day?

And so the Holy Days continue, and include orthodox saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishops, Teachers of the Faith, (379 and 389) Seraphim, Monk of Sarov, Spiritual Guide, 1833, and in our own ear, Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah, Bishop in South India, Evangelist, 1945.

Today, our thoughts are simply with the Holy Family. There, in the stable, the shepherds find Mary and Joseph with the child Jesus, exactly as the angels described. They were together. The words of Isaiah 61 continue today in our readings: the great Messianic mission. Jesus, as we will here soon, will repeat those words as a sign of God's promise. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...and today, the prophetic For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest.*

This was the mission from which Jesus would never rest. This is the mission of one steeped in the faith, hope and love of God, and the vision for a world united as one family. The words of Paul to the people of Galatia are worth repeating:

*When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.<sup>1</sup>*

For some, the Messianic mission was clouded with hopes of nationalism and patriotism: a hope that still persists today and continues to cause major issues today. No, the vision was to draw **ALL** people under the reign of God.

For the shepherds in that stable, so long ago, they encountered a poor and lowly family, struggling with the reality of moving from pre-married life into a strange place, ostracised and lonely, with shepherds and animals as their only companions. They looked and saw in this abject poverty the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise that all people are one under the Divine Mission. The Holy Family would obey the laws: tomorrow we remember the circumcision and naming according to law of the child. Jesus. *God saves.*

The story now unfolds as we follow Jesus resolutely towards Jerusalem when not his will, but the will of God is achieved.

It has been a busy time, but it is a time of new beginnings. We now move into a new calendar year. And as we do, contemplate the vision we have of the shepherds, the Holy Family, nurturing God's promise into the reality that we profess as our faith, our hope, and our love made perfect in the birth of a child, so long ago. This is the Really Good News of Christmas, a story that reminds us of the greatest thing we need to know: God is with us, now and always. May we continue to have the grace and courage to share this with all whom we meet, gathering all people into the Holy Family that is you, me, and the worldwide Church. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Not all of Thomas' legacy is something to uphold. Thomas sowed the seeds that would eventually boil over in the 1530s when a king, ignorant about how sons are made, began a process of removing the control of Church of the state to the state. Under Thomas, the deal that allowed him back into England, brokered in Normandy, kept Church and State separate in all matters except capital crime. The Church retained the right to discipline its own unless the matter was murder, treason or grand theft. All other matters were in the hands of the Bishops. Wind that a few centuries forward to Henry VIII, and then again to the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse of Children, and we begin to see how the problem of accountability to the wider community would be easily corrupted.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 4.4-7