
CHRISTMAS 2019

Amongst the many things that have happened since the Church turned its attention of the telling of the Good News of Jesus has been the weekly addition of a candle in the Advent Wreath.

The Advent Wreath, like the much loved Advent calendar's that some people enjoy at this time of year, is simply a method of counting down to the feast of the Nativity, the time when the Church, unsure of the date of Jesus' birth, celebrates the reality of the incarnation: God – with – us.

Up there in the upside down world of the north, the adding of one light each week in the gloomy but beautiful Norman and Gothic churches makes sense. Each week, the wreath gives off more light, shining as a symbol on Christmas Day as we give thanks for Jesus, the Light who has come into the world, the light no darkness can extinguish!

For us, as we remember the widespread fires across our great sunburned and barren lands, extinguishing the fearsome glow of the evening time is something that we must do, and we thank God for the volunteers in the CFA, the RFS, Tas Fire Service and all associations in each state. When we hear the hymn *God rest ye merry people all* may we spare a thought and prayer for each of them on whom our very life depends.

Each week, the Church has lit the candles, we have focussed on our readings and our teaching on a different word for the day. Each candle represents, in order this year (sometimes we change the order just to see if anyone notices!) HOPE, PEACE, Joy and LOVE, and tonight, as we proclaim Jesus' birth, God -with- us. That title is a special one, God – with – us. In the ancient Hebrew language, it said "Emmanuel".

Throughout the Advent journey we have been singing *O Come, O come Emmanuel*. Here, in this place today, we celebrate his coming.

HOPE is a longing for something better. It could be longing for a person who is special to come home safely. It could be a desire that the world could be a fairer place. It could be a deep prayer asking that God will return to us again in Jesus, leading us into the life eternal.

As a Church, we hope for a better world, and as we await the return of Jesus, we remember all his teachings that he left us.

Waiting does not mean we are to sit still. I both love and dislike waiting. In waiting, Jesus asks of us to carry on our working as we remember his life, begun in a stable and ended in his resurrection and glorious ascension.

Each of these candles point to those very words. Hope, peace, joy and love. We are not to be passive or lazy people waiting, we are to be active and doing things to make things better.

A word that came to mind is WAITERS. I kept thinking of fancy starched shirt men in bow ties obsequiously serving at the tables, or pristine beautiful people of all the genders in their neat black trendy aprons adjusting their split ends whilst they take our order. And I thought...no, that is not the waiting that is right...

...but actually, it is! That active waiting that brings HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE is best seen around the table as we begin the 12 day Christmas feast.

There was a fancy word for waiters in the time of Jesus. It was *diakonoi*. We get the modern word *deacon* from this. This Christmas, the Archbishop is giving us as a Parish the gift of a deacon – Alan Smith whom we welcome in February. Now does this mean that Alan is going to do all that active stuff with us? Well, “Yes and No.”

Yes...he will take his part in the team that is the body of Christ. And no, as we are a team and family, he will help us in our active waiting for Jesus to come.

So, what are we supposed to be doing? Talking, Praying, Lobbying and Accepting are good starts.

In order to understand HOPE, we need to give it a voice. Sometimes, that giving voice is not always well received, especially if it challenges people to act and think differently. We are hearing generations of younger people saying to the political class that they fear for the world at the moment. All generations have often expressed their fear, and together, where there is a strong will, hope prevails.

The threat of nuclear war was within hours of happening in the 1960s. An unwanted war in Vietnam was expressed as the hope that our services will return to a safe zone. In turn, their hopes were dashed as they were wrongly and undeservedly ignored. Hope was built with the words of Ronald Reagan: *Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!*

The hopes of the people of a united Berlin was born. Hope is more than a feeling, It is a movement, a powerful movement that can bring change. Now, we hope for a way of living differently in a damaged climate that threatens our ability to provide *our daily bread*.

In that journey of hopefulness, there is also the lobbying of those who elected, or have seized power, to work for the PEACE not only of the world, but in our communities. An accepting and informed community reflects and radiates the love that we are looking for more than any sense of aggression, posturing and false prosperity measured solely in terms of *mammon*. *Mammon* is the word Jesus used to describe excessive wealth. Being rich and having everything that you want is not prosperity. To live a life full of prosperity, as the Bible expresses it is to take what the Psalmist says in Psalm 133 verse 1: *how good and pleasant it is when all people live together in unity*.

To live in unity, able to agree and disagree without the need to respond with aggression, bullying, belittling or devaluing our humanness: what a dream this is! It can only bring joy. And yes, it is okay to disagree and see things differently! From alternate positions and wondering how to do things differently our world has changed, often for the better.

When Thomas Edison worked out the power of electricity to bring light, he relied on *Direct Current*. Nicolai Tesla, one of Edison's employees, saw the limitations and developed what was to become known as *alternating current*. As a result we can sit here under lights, with fans or heaters on, and communicate throughout the world. And all this happened with a (largely) healthy disagreement and the parting of ways!

And then there is the greatest gift of all...love, which we say came down at Christmas and dwelt amongst us. Love binds all things together. Love accepts all things, knows all things, bears all things and encourages growth.

The gift of love was not a king in robes and fancy circumstances. It was not something that the tabloids were able to exploit in their pursuit of the bottomless pit of low standards and mammon. Mary's fashion sense did not even rate an consideration on page 3!

God risked all and dwelt with us, vulnerably laying on a bed of hay in a backyard shed as a newly born baby. Wrapped in the rags of the poor, this baby was to grow and

show us now as he did then that the way to understanding what it truly means to have *God – with –us*. He overcame the power of separation from the ideals of God. He began a process of reconciliation but also warned us that in our waiting, this message may find some opposition, even to the point of death.

It was not in the point of suffering that Jesus encouraged us to follow him, but in the expression of the good things that are to come. A hope for a better world. A chance to build for a peace that lasts for ever. The joy of being with people and being accepted for who we are, not matter what our journey is: able, disabled, wealthy, poor, unemployed, LGBTQIA+, or even on another path to the Divine. In all of that, it is LOVE, dwelling amongst us that propels us out of being passive waiters into active preparers of the new world.

As the child Jesus grew, he increased in stature and wisdom. Then, after being baptised by John in the Jordan, he returned into Israel. He journeyed back to his home town. He opened a scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth, and read from the prophet Isaiah:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

And within your hearing and seeing, this is being fulfilled. Jesus was proclaiming a new world, a new world of hope. As we wait for the return, we are to be proclaiming the same in our thoughts, words and deeds. It only takes one pebble landing in a pond to radiate out a wave that can spread across the void. Imagine what one word of hope in the right place could achieve for this world?

This Christmastide, as we being our 12 day journey of celebration, may we, as members of the Body of Christ, be ambassadors of the words of the infant in the manger, bringing HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE into this world. Let us be doers of his words, and give thanks for the words that we have received from this Christ-child.