

Sunday 28th November 2004, Rob Lamerton

Readings:

- Isaiah 2:1-5
- Psalm 122
- Romans 13:9-14
- Matthew 24:36-44

It is Advent — and there themes are of readiness for new beginnings, preparedness, expectation and hope!

Around us, people look to Christmas with thoughts directed at parties, celebration, food, drink and presents.

Possibly we should discipline ourselves and simplify the Christmas observance!

Having said that — have you booked for the Parish Advent Dinner on Friday? \$14 per person, \$40 family...

In the first of our readings today, the prophet Isaiah expects a new era where people will want to worship God, to learn the ways of God and walk in God's path. Isaiah's hope is that this will lead the people from war to peace and productivity and he calls upon the people to walk in "the light of the Lord".

This whole exciting idea is built around the establishment of the mountain of the Lord's house as a place of worship where pilgrims come from all over the world "all the nations shall stream to it"

and so our psalm is No 122:

"I was overjoyed, Alleluia, when they said come with

us to the house of the Lord."

Jerusalem and the great temple is described with great joy, which inspires peace and prosperity among those who gather.

Sadly, the hopes for Jerusalem did not come to fruition — or if they did it was for a short time — the hopes and prayers of the people seemed not to be [?]

Jesus recognized that the temple and Jerusalem, which should have been a focus of hope, were not.

It was *not* the temple itself, but the way in which religious and secular power combined to thwart the genuine aspirations of God's people. The temple was indeed beautiful, but it was not fulfilling its purpose in making known the ways of God. Jesus points out that God chooses to dwell in and among us to create compassion, forgiveness, justice, love, mercy and tenderness. These are the things God embodies in Christ and calls us to embody in ourselves.

Story from 2004 Christmas Bowl Worship Resources

Sermon Stories:

Living positively ... breaking the silence

"It was not easy to face the fact that sooner or later I'll die because I'm infected with a disease that has no cure." Joy Lubinga, a 50-year old widow living positively with the HIV virus, openly shares her experiences to help break the silence and stigma of HIV/AIDS.

Joy, administrative assistant in the HIV/AIDS department at the Council of Churches in Zambia, a Christmas Bowl partner, amazes those who cross her path when she speaks of her HIV status. In Zambia the mention of HIV/AIDS, to most people, brings shame upon one's family — no one wants to be associated with the disease. This is not the case with Joy. She believes God gave her the courage to face life head on. Joy's husband, initially diagnosed with Tuberculosis and later HIV/AIDS, died in 1998 after a

long illness. She thanks God for the strength to nurse him through the final painful stages of his life.

In 2003, Joy's health deteriorated; she lost a lot of weight, had no appetite, and experienced frequent headaches. She knew something was wrong, so she plucked up the courage to go to the New Start Centre, a voluntary counselling and testing centre in Lusaka, to have an HIV test. When asked about her experience Joy said, "It's not easy to explain how I felt when I was told I was HIV positive. I had suspected it because of my husband's status and my deteriorating health. However, it was the idea that I may die at any moment that made it all so real."

Joy's health continued to deteriorate until her doctors recommended that she commence anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). They cost almost US\$50 per month. She knew they were too expensive for her, so she approached the General Secretary of the Council of Churches in Zambia, Reverend Japhet Ndlilovu, to help her. "He willingly assisted me to gain access to the government scheme for ARVs, and to date, I'm still receiving the drugs," Joy said.

Her health has improved considerably, and she has put on weight. Now, when Joy sees the doctor, she is treated like any other person.

Asked how the disclosure of her status has affected her relationships with others, Joy says, "I've had no problems with my workmates, they've been supportive and encouraging. I think they understand these issues well. And my children want to see me happy and healthy all the time." Joy's worst experience was at church where members gossiped among themselves. Some of them opposed her undertaking particular jobs because of her HIV status. However, others were very supportive and kept her in their prayers. Joy explained that she felt she had to publicly disclose her status because she wanted to play a strong role in breaking the silence on HIV/AIDS, especially in the Church — "then we will fight the stigma," she says.

"I want to appeal to the Church to embrace those living with the virus so that more people can be encouraged to come out and disclose their status." Joy

is living positively, and helping others to find courage, HOPE. and peace.

So often institutions lose their sense of purpose and begin to exist for themselves alone OR for their members — new people are not welcomed, people are not renewed and healed, nor are they sent out with hope and peace. —

The Church must not forget its calling!
Advent is a time for beginning again!
Yes, the Church too can become so easy and comfortable with little renewing of people's spirit.

I wonder if we are not choking on our own administration and paperwork and the demands of maintenance! If we are then we need to have a long look at ourselves.

Advent gives us this time and opportunity to make some New Year's Resolutions about our life as Christians — and to think about *how* we welcome Christ — Day by Day.

Prayer of St Richard of Chichester:

Thanks be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have won for me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day

Do we pray?

Do we meditate on our faith?

Do we examine our relationships?

Do we reach out in care to the people next door?

Do we think how we might respond to those at work?

Do we reflect on the Scriptures? Are we active in caring for those close — family...

Jesus spoke of *readiness* to encounter the Son of Man — "about that day and hour no-one knows, neither the angels, nor the Son, only the Father." So Jesus counsels readiness minute by minute, hour by hour.

Paul too, in his letter to the Romans warns his readers to be awake and ready, to live honourably and obey the great commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself".

Advent calls us to look again at what this means.

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