

God gazes at us

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Revd Linda Anshell
Sunday 24th December 2006, Advent 4

Micah 5:2-5; Song of Mary, APBA, page 31; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Is it Advent 4 or Christmas Eve? Fred and I argued about that on Friday night. Are this morning's church services Christmas services to be advertised in the paper? Are there really no church services in Manuka at St Paul's or St Christopher's this morning?

I doubt it.

Now — it *is* Advent. *Still*, we prepare; Christmas has not yet begun, even though we sang *O Come All ye Faithful* on Thursday night, even though the mangoes and cherries are in the stores...

I have even seen one Christmas beetle! It must be (nearly) Christmas! No ... the twelve days of Christmas start *tonight*. **TODAY** we focus still on our preparation; the fourth candle has been lit, the candle for Love.

We started Advent by lighting the candle for HOPE, then PEACE, and last week, JOY.

Every week we are going deeper into these words.

We had hoped to be running "Come and See" this Advent, and preaching for that. But there is something missing: the questions.

I'm not really sure what the questions might be, but for me, the *answers* are Christmas and Easter.

The focus is of course on Easter. John Carger mentioned yesterday that (he knew not why) the Oratorios have mostly Easter themes. Even *Messiah* is more Easter than Christmas! (Did you notice?)

The gospels can be called "Passion Narratives"; the end of the story is the main point. The infancy stories are only in two of the gospels. (and Isaiah!)

"what happened at Christmas?"

and

"what happened at Easter?"

are questions that we can hang our stories, our understandings of our faith on. I love asking parents who bring their children for baptism those questions! And then hearing them grope to articulate a deeper understanding than we usually talk about. But then, young parents with new born children are in that place of wonder and awe!

It's no wonder that we don't ask these questions. Faith isn't easy to talk about, especially if it is just there and always has been. I have surprised myself a couple of times in recent years getting quite "evangelical" about new things which are happening to me, or new things we are doing. I learn something and understand the world in a new way, and I want to tell the world! But church, faith, belief, well... it's not easy is it?

Allow me to wander around here a bit. I wanted to talk about Emperor Penguins today. I saw the movie last week and it is amazing.

I also wanted to slam into the consumerist Christmas, but in a way Chris did that last week. There is a strange undercurrent of spirituality in all of us I suspect. Even atheists get very evangelical! Perhaps Christmas is a time to wake up the spiritual in us!

Jeanette has said that Iona is a place where the distance between the spiritual and the natural world is very thin. It is said to be a thin place. Is Christmas a thin or a thick time I wonder? Both, I suspect.

We certainly have difficulty spanning that distance between the spiritual and the natural world...

So, on this Fourth Sunday in Advent, what do we have?

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah,"

one of the little clans....

and a lowly servant sings.

A young woman is pregnant and glorifying God. Her cousin is exultant, as is the child in the womb! (he leaped for joy!)

God visiting us in the small and humble; but more...

The really big story of Christmas is of course the love shown to us by god in becoming human... In reaching out to us... reaching out to the lowliest places, the lowliest people...

Love has that strange balance of gift; giver and receiver... who gives and who receives? The giver is given... the blessing just flows between, within, throughout the relationship.

[and about here, I did add in some Emperor Penguin comments. As I turned into the parking area this morning I was listening to Encounter on Radio National. And the Dominican friar who was talking was talking about relationship, and love, and gaze. And I thought of the penguins. Last week I saw the movie, March of the Penguins. When they reach the safe place to lay their eggs, (fifty or more miles into the Antarctic ice!) they then mill around and choose their mate. And the film has this wonderful scene of two penguins, just standing and gazing at one another, beaks sometimes touching, heads sometimes lowered, but just gazing... Have you ever seen two adolescents looking like that?

Or, the gaze held between a mother and baby.

God gazes at us, and we gaze back...]

As god reaches out to us, we reach back to god...

or, as Julian of Norwich says:

What can allow us to take more delight in God, than to see that he takes delight in us

The Hope spoken of by Rebecca gives us the courage to stand up and lift our heads when there are signs of apocalyptic calamity, as there are now. This hope is a way to conduct your life, to live well. (and with courage!)

Brian reminded us that Peace is a work of justice. It is a continuous work of conversion and change. Peace enables us to live our lives fully. Peace is not passive. Authentic peace implies struggle and creativity.

Then Chris last week in talking about Joy said: "Christian joy is ...powerful and disturbing and transforming." and he said: "My impression is that as one grows into salvation, one also grows into a kind of deep faith-based joy that comprehends everything good and everything apparently painful and accepts it all, and in that joy, which comes from the Lord, blesses and transforms it all."

Love, hope, peace and joy all intertwine. Love gives the courage to hope, the energy to seek justice and make peace, and the joy...

Where are we now, at this end of Advent?

Are we ready now to greet the Christ Child? Do we have the faith to come to his cradle? To seek him, to see the star and follow?

and to share that?

Augustine has said: "We would not be searching if we had not already found."

What is it we have found in this place? Who is it we have found in that manger. We come to seek the child, to seek to love the god who loves us.

and in that love to dwell and move and work and be...

in the words of Christina Rossetti: Love shall be our token, love be yours and love be mine, love to God and neighbours, love for plea and gift and sign.

Some references and links for web readers. (who haven't got the sermon as it was presented. I can't remember how I put some things, and I couldn't remember some words when I was preaching! So you have something. Just a flavour perhaps!)

Previous sermons quoted were:

From Rebecca, 3 December 2006, from Brian, 10 December 2006, from Chris, 17 December 2006.

The Julian of Norwich quote is used (and expanded) in the Advent Calendar for Advent2006, day 21.

More on the Penguins is at:

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/01/0117_020117antarcticpenguins.html (This is a 2002 article!)

and the Australian Antarctic Division web page:

<http://www.aad.gov.au/default.asp?casid=1931>