

Advent 2C

6<sup>th</sup> December 2009 Reverend Rebecca Newland

Well this is wonderful to be here! I am so looking forward to my time with you all and the ministry we will share. I have now been inducted and firmly set in my place although I did think Bishop Stuart's waltz down the aisle with me was a little like a fly by. But I am here – it is a done deal. I am your priest and leader, your pastor and teacher, your sister in Christ and I hope your friend in need. So I thought I would take a few minutes to fill you in on some vital information about myself that might help us as we get used to each other –again!

I am shy. I know that might be hard to believe but I am. When I stand in a pulpit or behind an altar there is no shyness at all but as soon as I am in the foyer it is different story. What this means is that sometimes I can come across as aloof or stand offish. When I was in high school I was mortified to hear that some of the other girls thought I was a snob. This seemed very strange to me because I came from a working class family and we never had two pennies to rub together. When I became an adult and began to understand myself a bit better I realized my shyness had been misinterpreted. Shy people can find it hard to interact comfortably in social settings and they hate the lime-light. Now my shyness is not your problem. God and the Spirit are doing their work in me and the mere fact that I can do the work of a priest and minister at all is a sheer miracle. God is also working on my nervousness around playing music in public but that is another story – watch out when I finally combine fiddle playing with preaching – it is coming! What my shyness means for you is that I need to ask you to please not interpret the odd vacant gaze as me ignoring you or not liking you. I am simply readjusting my inner landscape and reconnecting.

I am also an introvert. I need and crave time alone. I am very good at making that happen but you will find that by the end of activities on Sunday my eyes have glazed over. I am also not Rob – nor Ray. Rob had a long and fruitful ministry here. He was very gifted in many ways. His gifts are not mine. One of his outstanding gifts was being able to remember names. I cannot do that easily. Shyness combined with

being an introvert means I simply become blank sometimes. So please forgive me in advance if I stand there smiling and call you dear while I struggle to remember your name –and that can happen when I have known someone for years.

And finally – before a service is the worst possible time to ask me a question about some issue. I am on the end of the phone at other times or in the office or study.

Monday is my day off, in which I have committed to keeping a full and prayerful Sabbath. I also have the option of taking two days off in a row. You might find the covenant between St Philips and myself that was agreed upon by the Bishop, the wardens and myself a useful piece to read. There are some copies at the back of the church. Have a read and leave it for the next person.

You also might be wondering – what is Rebecca going to do? What is she going to change? Well I don't know. Perhaps nothing. There needs to be time of adjusting and settling in. There needs to be careful consultation, discussion and prayer before any significant decisions are made. I am not into change for change sake but I am into change for the sake of the gospel, for that message of good news. I believe God has put this church here for one primary purpose – to be a place where men, women and children can 'come and see' the Christ. They see Christ in our fellowship, our worship, our music making, our community life and in our life stories. Our job is to shine that light of Christ more fully day by day. Our job is to invite others to be bathed in that light and then transformed. For St Philips to continue to incarnate Christ in this community 10, 20 years into the future we need others to join us – it is as simple as that. Together we need to work out how to do that task effectively with the resources we have. There are many parts to that process. Some change will be needed but for me this is always firstly a change in the heart. Everything else follows from that. Discussion, disagreement and consensus, risk taking and failure will also be part of the process. But the most important thing will be prayer. So I ask you to commit this thought to prayer, *“Show us Lord, how we can use our gifts and talents, our story and energy, to encourage others to come and see”*. Well that is enough about the fine print...

On to this new beginning! I was touched by Ray's words in last weeks pew sheet

when he wrote of the journey this parish had been on over the last fifteen months. It has been a time of sorrow, grieving, letting go and now being ready to take the next step. I had cause to speak to Sandy during the week and she is doing well. She also told me to be careful to not dig up the garden along the back fence as that was where many rectory families pets have been buried! My journey over the last few months has also been a time of grieving and letting go, of a new beginning.

How wonderful it is that my new beginning is here amongst such good friends. So we are all on the brink of something new. And in churches and Christian communities all over the world people are celebrating and anticipating new beginnings as we prepare for the coming of Christ.

It is then highly appropriate that our Gospel reading is the prophetic words of John the Baptist - "Prepare the way of the Lord". For a new beginning we need to clear the ways, straighten the paths. Have any of you ever packed for a journey and ended up with not enough room in your bag? There is the suitcase or backpack sitting there, overflowing with things you think you need. But the only way to lift it up and get it in the car or taxi or whatever is to leave some things behind, things that in the end will weigh you down and be more trouble than they are worth. To really enjoy a new journey we take only what we truly need. We jettison the rest. When I took my son Michael to the plane to fly to Thailand for four months I was gob smacked at his luggage...(story)...it was a revelation!

John's words are all about preparation for the journey ahead, the journey of following the Christ. He urges his listeners to leave behind those things, those ways of believing and acting that get in the way. The way he did that was to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now you have all heard this before but it is worth saying again.

In the Greek New Testament repentance is translated from the word metanoia. It means to literally to turn around and face the other way. (Not a 360 degree turn but a 180). It was used as an army turn of phrase – like – 'about face'. It is like we are all going off on different tangents and God through John the Baptist says, "About face" –

go this way, this is the way that leads to fullness of life, this is the new beginning that will set you free.

This is a difficult message in the silly season of commercial Christmas. There are so many distractions that take us away from the path of Christ. But every day of the year we tend to be distracted by mountains of work, paths of indecision and valleys of doubt and fear not to mention the tyranny of things, of stuff. John's cry in the wilderness is almost impossible to hear at times. Partly our business is to blame but it is also because this message comes at the fringes of our life.

Luke pinpoints the time and place when "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah." The "fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" dates his story to about the year 26 AD. Luke also identifies the *political* context; the word of God came to John the Baptist "when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene." After naming Rome's *political* powers both great and small, Luke then identifies Jerusalem's *religious* establishment; the story takes place "during the high priesthood of Annas and [his successor] Caiaphas."

These minor political and religious details highlight a major theme in the story of Jesus. The "word of the Lord" through John the Baptist came neither from imperial Rome nor from Israel's religious establishment in the temple. It did not come from someone dressed in fashionable clothes who lived in an expensive palace as said Jesus in Luke 7. Nor did it come from a board room, university laboratory, ski lodge or power lunch. God's word to all humanity came from a wild and woolly man who lived in the deep of the desert, on the fringes of society rather than in its corridors of power, at the periphery rather than at the epicenter. The divine messenger and his message originated in an unlikely place and from an improbable source.

This improbable messenger tells us to repent and prepare the way. To repent, as I said, means to turn around. It means to change one's mind, one's life. Repentance doesn't mean to feel bad, but to think differently. To repent doesn't mean to grovel in self-hatred, morbid introspection, or pious sorrow. When you repent you turn around,

change directions, choose a different path, and make a radical rupture. It is a conscious and radical decision and therefore brings an abrupt end to life on auto-pilot or to business as usual. And this is not a one off event. It is a way of life. It is hearing that insistent voice of God who says, "come to me, I am coming to you". When we hear that voice we then take the steps that bring us closer to him. It's like Romeo calling Juliet to shut down the computer and come to the balcony 'cause he is on his way up. Time and again we hear the voice and we 'repent', we turn around and meet the Lord.

But why is there such urgency and abandonment? Why not go home and talk it over with the family and friends? Why not wait until after Christmas? Jesus invited Peter, Andrew, James and John to reorient their lives by following him because in his own person "the kingdom of God has arrived." Jesus announced and embodied God's rule or reign on earth, right here and right now. In Jesus all flesh, that's all material and energy in the universe, will see the salvation of the Lord. There was an unmistakable element of cosmic fulfillment in Jesus preaching, teaching, and healing: "The *kairos*, the time, has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news!"

Genuine repentance is a deeply personal and individually unique act before God and our neighbor. Repentance has its communal aspects, and if you are lucky others might help you, but no one can repent for another; you can only repent for yourself. So I ask you and I ask myself as we begin this new journey together and as we await the coming of the Lord, what do we need to turn away from? What do we need to let go of? What regrets and resentments are we holding too closely? What negative directions are we facing individually that means we are not working together or with God? What bits of church gossip or mumblings have side tracked us? For what do we need forgiveness from God, others and ourselves? What do we need to do differently to live a life turned towards God? I do not know the answer for you. I

only know that as Ghandi said the only evil in the world is inside our hearts. That's where the battle should be fought.

For we have an exciting and wonderful journey ahead of us. There is nothing more beautiful, good or true than following the Christ. How that journey goes will depend partly on how well we have prepared the way in ourselves and in our relationships, in our life together in this place. So, “about face”! Let’s step up to the mark and meet the Lord as he comes. And as Paul says may we determine what is best so that we can produce the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.