

Fourth Sunday of Advent 2019

Thomas Beckett in TS Eliot's play 'Murder in the Cathedral' says of Christmas 'we both mourn and rejoice at once for the same reason.' Our rather sheltered, comfortable lives are now being impacted upon by the fires that at present are burning throughout NSW. The smoke that has shrouded us for the last week or so is a potent and ever present reminder of the destructive fires burning so close. The Dean of St Mark's Dr Andrew Errington wrote this week:

As we approach this Christmas, the groaning of this world hangs heavy in the air. The unearthly smoke lingers, whispering of lost forests, animals, and human lives and homes. We breathe in a daily reminder of the dust from which we come and to which we will return. The good earth is dry and pulses with a heat that is beginning to frighten us.

All this can seem very out of step with Christmas, a kind of rude affront. And it is out of step with Christmas as we often think of it: a festival of gifts and eating, of joy in the goodness of life and of family. It is harder to celebrate in this way this year.

Andrew is right, it is out of step with Christmas as we often think of it. But Christmas as we often think of it, can simply be the superficial festivities without engagement in the story presented by the evangelists. It is Christmas without Advent. Perhaps as we wrestle with the environmental issues around us, which have now been brought into our suburbs and as we consider a Christian response, it is in the discomfort of the smoke, the ash and the parched gardens that we can begin to understand what Christmas should be. Rather than a fairy tale, Christmas is but the coming of God into a broken world and it is only by engaging in this brokenness that we can celebrate what Christmas truly means. It is right that we both mourn and rejoice for the same reason.

Last Sunday Canon Scott introduced us to the 'hard men' of politics, religion and business. We meet one such man today in the person of King Ahaz; young, brash, independent, he clearly felt he had the business of international relations stitched up. He was wrong. He looked for signs in the wrong places because they probably gave him the answers he wanted. Ask of *God* a sign says the prophet; he gets one eventually whether he likes it or not. It comes in the form of a child and that prophecy is fulfilled in the person of Jesus as we heard today. A child, Emmanuel, the future, bringing renewal and freshness, the power to dispel even the darkest times.

But this child is born to die, as are we all. St Paul reminds us of this today. He was the one declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness 'by resurrection from the dead.' Advent whilst being a season of preparation and expectation is also a season when we are

reminded that this Jesus is not just the climax of all that has gone before but is also the future, as that we sing in that wonderful Christmas hymn, 'he is Alpha and Omega.' We know the future so we mourn and celebrate for the same reason.

Once again at this years' service of carols and readings we heard from TS Eliot, this is deliberate. In TS Eliot we find the tension between dying and birth and in this way I think Eliot helps us find that balance between action and contemplation. Last year you might recall we heard those wonderful words from the Journey of the Magi, it's worth hearing them again:

...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

This year we heard from the conclusion of another of his poems, Little Gidding:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

As we approach this Christmas tide I hope that we are prepared. Prepared to hear the story anew and find in it both the drama and the hope of

humanity so wonderfully portrayed in Matthew's account. We do tend to reach Christmas with a sigh of relief for some, verging on despair for others, rather than a sense that something new has happened. If we keep a good Advent then something within us will have changed, died even, to make way for something radically different. We are tempted to despair at present, we are no longer at ease in the old dispensation. The smoke blinds us, it is a metaphor for our unseeing. As Christians we must continue to see in the fires not just destruction but the purging of the old ways; the fire and purity of the rose are one. In this way we will look forward with hope, find new ways, we will turn again to the dawn and in it find renewal. The turning comes with cost, it recalls us to simplicity costing not less than everything. But all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well. Amen.