



Advent 4 2009

Today, all the candles on the Advent Wreath are lit – save the last one which gets lit on Christmas Eve. It's giving us a warning that Christmas is soon upon us. But that's probably old news. You get that message everywhere and everywhere you go there is an air of expectancy. The stores are screaming that there are only 4 shopping days left (but it's *not too late* to get that perfect gift). Your calendar or day timer is all full up - full of upcoming dinners and parties you are expected to attend - or perhaps you are X-ing off the days and counting the hours before that special expected guest arrives and comes through the door.

Everyone has an expectation of the holidays.

The other day, over a cup of tea I asked a friend of mine "What do you expect out of Christmas this year?" She laughed and said "I just expect to get through it this year."

I know what she means.

The thing I discover more and more is how Christmas can be a difficult time for people. For many people Christmas is confusing and leaves them with a sense of being disillusioned a sense of being disappointed - almost cheated – and they don't know why. A friend of mine said to me "I hate Christmas – it's just too difficult". A lot of people would secretly agree with that.

Perhaps the problem is around our expectations of Christmas. People expect many things from the holidays that just don't happen that just don't pan out. By the time it's over Canadians will have spent 3,000,000,000 – Three Billion Dollars and somewhere in that spending we buy into the illusion that somehow we will purchase those things our soul desperately longs for.

For some that perfect Christmas gift purchases them proof that they are loved. Others hold onto the illusion that they will find a happiness or joy through that gift and others hope that big gift the dream of perhaps a new car - will give them the status they have so





longed for. Of course, none of these things really work – rather than proofs of love gifts are often bought out of obligation the happiness and joy they bring are fleeting and the big ticket item soon isn't quite as stylish in a few months.

Others have an expectation that Christmas will bring harmony and love to their families – they long for one perfect Christmas dinner where “everyone gets along” and hopes are built up. Of course, these expectations evaporate pretty quickly because families are families and people are people and we all fall back into the same old patterns we always had and despite the beautiful Christmas lights some homes are pretty dark on the inside.

And for others – there is a sentimental expectation that somehow, just for a few hours the world will be ok – just for a little while. Of course, this expectation is perhaps the most vulnerable of all as tragedy doesn't know it is Christmas. One of the strange things I heard a few years ago after the Tsunami of 2004 was “Why did it have to happen at Christmas time?”

The latest disillusionment for the world is a big one – in the form of the failure of the conference in Copenhagen. Our expectations, it seems, constantly disappoint us and confuse us and it makes one wonder why we have them. Perhaps they are a sort of yearning of the human heart for a taste of Eden – a sort of ache for a place of perfection we dream about that wonderful moment that we think somehow should be there if only we can find it or acquire the right spirit of Christmas – and we always are disappointed by this expectation.

The gospel story today is also about expectations – it is the happy story of Elizabeth and Mary meeting each other... and they are both expecting and the gospel I think helps remind us to ask the right question – and that is not what are you expecting but who are you expecting at this time?

The gospel is about the expectation of Christ – about the expectation of the ages about the one who was promised to be born





the light of this dark world. As John says of Jesus, “He was the true Light that lighteth everyone that cometh into the world”.

And the light shines in this way – it shines in Jesus confronting the darkness of the world and overcoming the darkness of death. It shines in Jesus giving the message that all are loved by God the Father – and that no one is turned away who seeks him. It shines in Jesus seeking everyone who have lost their way and to bringing home all who have strayed. It shines with Jesus delivering the unquenchable truth that God is on our side on the side of all people and not wavering in that message even upon the cross.

And the gospel reminds us that the one expectation we can have and not be disappointed in is the knowledge that God is with us – no matter what – this is what the word Emmanuel means – God with us – this is promise of the child born in Bethlehem - “Behold I am with you even unto the end of the world”.

And that includes being with us even when our culture is crazed by materialism even when our families still have the same old squabbles and problems even when our world leaders disappoint us and bad things still happen on Christmas – in sending Jesus to us God showed us with great compassion that he was with us through it all – and would never leave us.

And we are reminded that the child born in Bethlehem has expectations of us as well. That we will honour his birth as we seek to be in this materialistic world but not of it. As we seek to bring peacemakers in our families and communities as we seek to care for God’s creation and as we give comfort and love to those around us while we wait for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Advent reminds us that our expectations will be different from everyone else’s expectations - and to be ready for Christmas so that we can receive the Christ child well for he is the light of the world the true light of this Christmas season - and who expects to find a home in our hearts and that we will in his name be lights to the world.

