

Sermon Advent 3 Year C 2018

Sometimes it's good to re-state the obvious. And one of the things it is good to restate and remind ourselves of is that Christians seek to order their lives according to God's plan for us. All our many activities and plans, all the busyness and programmes we engage in, all the functions and roles we occupy ourselves with are really only so that we can shape our lives according to the vision of the Gospel. And if we live according to God's plan for us, we will walk a different path, we will align ourselves to a different drum beat. Our lives will be marked out as different because we will have different priorities, different values than most of the people around us. One of the very simple things that will mark us out as different will be our observance of sacred time: our days, our weeks, our years ordered according to truths of our faith.

The basic component of that sacred time is of course Sunday: a day set aside dedicated to rest and attending to the things of God. The year too is marked with a sacred character. It is not Mother's Day and Father's Day, not national days or ANZAC day, or even the Melbourne Cup or the 'holiday season' that punctuates the year for Christians. Rather, it is celebrations of the birth, death and resurrection of our Lord, celebrations of the saints, and other holy days on which we celebrate certain mysteries of our faith by which shape our year. We observe them each year so that we are reminded on a regular basis of these key moments, these key figures, these key beliefs. A week, a year and indeed a life time can be patterned according to sacred time; our weeks and years and our lives can be a living witness to our faith.

These rhythms and patterns of course do not say that attending to the things of God is restricted to these times. Much less that some days and events are more holy or special than others. But we set aside certain days and certain seasons and certain moments in our lives to remind us that *all* days and all seasons and all moments belong to God. And it is a basic truth that if we do not set aside *some* days or moments then it is unlikely we will set aside *any* day or moment for God. So, these celebrations - these days and moments and seasons - help form us in the faith, because they put before us in a regular, ordered manner the various aspects of the faith.

Two weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, we noted the new church year. And this in itself is a small sign that *we are* out of step with the world around us. Advent is the start of our church year. And New Years are good opportunities for reflection and re-evaluation. A new year - whether the church year or indeed the secular year - captures a sense 'turning': of leaving behind one thing and moving toward another. As we now make our way into the new church year it is good to consider the things we have to '*let go*' of; the things it is good to leave behind in the year behind.

We leave behind our false starts and failings. They're gone and we don't have to worry about them any more! But there may be some sadness too, especially if the past year was marked by death and loss. There may also be sadness for us if it has been a good year, with a desire to cling to, to hold onto the good things of the past. But the invitation to 'let go' in this season of Advent is so that we might *look forward* in hope to what God is offering us. Letting go is really one of those key spiritual attitudes that ought to grow as we grow into God's plan for us. This season of Advent *highlights* it for us in the course of our year. But our own Sunday observance - week in and week out - requires of us too, a certain letting go: of certain preferences, of certain things we might rather be doing, of certain preoccupations, certain demands on our time so that we can be faithful in our Sunday observances. We have to let go of some family demands and societal demands and for many people today even work demands if *the basic* Christian witness is to be maintained.

But more than our weekly observances. And more than just a season. This letting go is also one of the rhythms of our life. As we all age, we are all faced with the reality of letting go of activity, of independence, of memories even. But ultimately all of us must learn to let go of our own lives, as we age and prepare ourselves to die. It is the great failure of our culture that we do next to nothing to help people in that ultimate letting go; to help people make sense of their lives, to allow age be a gift to us, rather than a burden. The work of letting go *is not* negative. For people of faith it points us toward that ultimate opening up to the mystery of God, where our true life and ultimate hope lay.

In the midst of this season - half way through our Advent journey - the loud note of joy, of gladness and happiness strikes through the readings. Even as the year turns and we do the hard work of letting go, it is with that spirit of joy and happiness. But so we don't get ahead of ourselves - and so we're anchored firmly in the real world - even as we look ahead, we have again the figure of John the Baptist. And he has some great, practical advice! Today, we hear the Baptist address members of three groups: the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers. They ask him, '*what should we do*', which shows they have heard the message of John, they have taken it seriously and they want to change. *These* groups are at a turning - leaving behind old ways and looking forward to something else. The advice that John gives to each group highlights a central Lucan theme - something we will come across again and again as we journey with the gospel writer Luke this year: the concern that nothing so hinders relationship with God - nothing so dehumanizes human beings and ruins life in community - as attachment to wealth, possession and power: clinging on to extra tunics, taking more than what is owed you, bullying those under you. To live the life of God means letting go of these things in particular.

What John says to the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers is said to us: if we are going to be serious about sharing in the life of God, then we need to let go of all those things we so often hold dear, the things we so often cling to: power and possessions. Perhaps the warning rings even louder for us at this time of year as we hurtle along to a great frenzy of consumerist activity. Each year there are murmurs of complaint about how commercial Christmas has become, and every year nothing much happens to change it. Perhaps John's words could at least have us consider the seriousness of the challenge.

My friends, we have stepped into a new church year. A year's end suggests to us death, the end of things, of letting go. But if *that* is the case, it is also about life and newness and birth. This is of course the two faces of the Christmas story: letting go so we may live. This is the story of Christ: born to die, and dying so we might live. As we set our sights on the birth of our Lord, we pray we may approach unencumbered with the past; open to all that God may bring us; open to life; open in hope to the possibilities of the future. Amen.