

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James'

Christmas Night

25th December 2018.

'The Clichéd Christ'

Readings: Isaiah 9: 2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-20.

You Can Talk in Clichés 'till the Cows Come Home

The scene is the British Prime Minister's office and the situation is a scandal in the banking industry. The appointment of a new Governor of the Bank of England is required, but whom? The Chairman of Bartlett's Bank, Sir Desmond Glazebrook, is sharing his views by trying to explain the cultural life of banking. He said:

"The City's a funny place, you know, Prime Minister. If you spill the beans you open up a whole can of worms. I mean, how can you let sleeping dogs lie if you let the cat out of the bag? Bring in a new broom and if you're not very careful you find you've thrown the baby out with the bathwater. If you change horses in the middle of the stream, next thing you know you're up the creek without a paddle."

PM, Jim Hacker, responded: *"And then the balloon goes up!"*

Glazebrook: *"Obviously. They hit you for six. An own goal in fact."*

Later in the episode, Hacker said of Glazebrook:

"Desmond Glazebrook as governor? I mean, he's such a fool. He only talks in clichés. You can go on talking in clichés till the cows come home!"

A cliché is defined as 'a phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought'. Tonight, I want to consider the possibility that Christmas, as we celebrate it, has become a cliché and therefore lost its power to transform people's lives.

The popular recounting of the Christmas story tends to gloss over its more confronting aspects. Likewise, in western culture we have conflated it with the St Nicholas story such that it would seem that it has become Santa Claus who is reborn each year, thereby bringing good news to merchants and good cheer to the office party.

In contrast, the birth narratives of Jesus display some challenging scenes:

1. Jesus was born in poverty and as an outsider – there were no family members in Bethlehem willing to accommodate them, and a stable is a filthy place;
2. There is a recurring theme of fear throughout the story;
 - Joseph fears embarrassment and shame,
 - Mary fears what might happen to her if she is rejected,
 - The shepherds fear the messengers that come to them in the fields, and
 - King Herod fears the emergence of a rival and possible rebellion;
3. Strangers came with gifts symbolising kingship, priesthood and death;
4. Jesus became a refugee when his family fled to Egypt;
5. Innocent children were murdered by a tyrannical king for no good purpose; and
6. Prophets predicted political turmoil as a result of the birth of this child.

These things are not the stuff of a happy, prosperous and peaceful lives, but rather are portents of trouble. By presenting us with the effects of poverty, fear, a refugee family, the murder of innocents, and rising political instability, the birth-story of Jesus is meant to disturb rather than relax us.

Familiarity and its accompanying sentimentality have robbed the Christmas narrative of its ability to challenge, inspire and transform. It tends to draw us away from God and the mystery of life and instead direct us toward what is ultimately a spiritual hollowness that reveres mammon and its usual minions of consumption, money and power.

Contemplating the Mystery

An alternate view is that Christmas is a mystery to be contemplated through symbol, narrative and ritual. At St James we understand the strength of these forms of communication because they give us an experience that moves us from the mundane to the mystical. Our worship is immersed in poetry, music, movement, colour and smell; and through this multi-faceted engagement with our senses we are given glimpses of the spiritual dimension of life and an encounter with the God who comes to us.

Most importantly, the Christmas mystery reminds us that God is present in humanity and comes to us because of a desire to be actively engaged with creation. As theologian James Alison suggests, we don't need to fight to get God's attention, we already have it; and we don't need to do things to win God's affection; we are already the objects of his unconditional love. Such love is not tribal nor exclusive but is extended to all humanity; as we say on our worship guides: 'regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or religion'.

Moreover, our contemplation of Christmas can help us to understand that God is intimately present in creation – or more correctly, creation is intimately caught up in God. In this way, God remains present to us always; yet there are also moments in time when God comes to us in a special way.

God Coming to His People

The Old Testament describes God's special presence as happening in many ways:

- through the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David;
- in amazing events such as the 'burning bush' and Moses,
- with the words and actions of the prophets, and
- through the priestly rituals at the Tent of Meeting and Temple.

During the Exile in Babylon, the Hebrews first thought that they had been estranged from God (who they supposed had remained in Judea), but later they discovered that God was, in fact, present everywhere and could work through non-Israelites such as King Cyrus of Persia. Their horizon therefore expanded as they came to see that God is not bound by place, tribe, or any other human construct; for God is in all and for all.

The New Testament goes on to describe God as coming to humanity in the person of Jesus – a human being who was born and lived like any other person, but who was also full of God's Spirit, such that we could only understand him as God in humanity. Finally, the Bible describes God as coming to the followers of Jesus through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Through this event humanity came to understand that the Spirit of God that was present in Jesus is also present in each one of us. We are therefore all children of God.

And Wise Men Seek Him, Still

So, it is, that God continues to enter the world and our lives; drawing us into a relationship with him. It is also what is happening when we meet in worship to celebrate the Eucharist. We come to meet with God and God encounters us in word and sacrament. In this way we recognise that God is continually present both individually and also corporately - in our families, churches, community life and world.

If we want to find God, we need to learn to look in the right place. One of the aspects of our gathering in worship tonight is to put ourselves in a place where an encounter with God can happen. As Eric Milner-White, (Dean of Kings College, Cambridge) said at the first Nine Lessons and Carols Service - this night one hundred years ago: "we come to hear again the message of the angels, and to transport ourselves in heart and mind to Bethlehem, there to see the loving-kindness of our God, and the baby lying in a manger...."

This is not a cliché but rather a statement of a deep spiritual yearning to discover God in our world and in our own times – a world of darkness longing for the light of hope and love.