

CHRISTMAS IS FOR COMMUNITY

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 25th December 2005

Theme

Christmas is “a community thing”.

Our faith is “a community thing”.

Sermon

Ready or not, Christmas has arrived, and Christmas is a community event, ideally at least. We aim to be with family or friends, and may travel long distances to achieve this – as many from this congregation have done in going away, and some of you here today have travelled far in coming to Hilton to be with family.

We also get together with our local community. It seems good to worship together, even to people who do so irregularly.

Some of those who do worship regularly, but go away at Christmas, say how much they miss being in their “home church” at this time. It is not a judgment on any other church community they may worship with, just a comment about missing being with people they know and in whom they are in a community of faith.

In our congregation we have kept an eye out for those on their own, for whatever reason – friends gone away, recently widowed, family living too far away to get to – to ensure that no one is alone for the celebration of Christ’s birthday.

Community is an essential element of the Christmas story:

- God came to be with humanity in all our glory and in all our pain and sin. God came with the name “Emmanuel” – meaning “God with us”. Jesus did not remain aloof, or in some perfect realm from where he could dispense pearls of wisdom. He came in person to be with us.
- In doing so, God somehow was revealed as a “community”. Don’t worry if you don’t fully understand the concept of Trinity, of God as Creator, as Saviour, and as Holy Spirit, three aspects but One God – for not even the theologians fully understand it. But Jesus revealed that somehow, even God exists in community, and that the things of God are revealed in different ways through the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
- Jesus’ birth involved Mary and Joseph, it involved the Holy Spirit, and angels, and an innkeeper, and shepherds, and sages from afar who came to worship, and the unknown people in places to which they fled as refugees to avoid mass killings initiated by a ruler of the time.

A few years ago when we initiated the Christmas Eve family communion service, calling it “A birthday party for Jesus”, we used a delightful story called “Round the Back”, a telling of the nativity from the innkeeper’s perspective. Through her work, Julia was able to offer it to a drama teacher at a school in PMB where it was used this year for their Nativity – something refreshingly different but no less cute as literally every single girl from the junior primary section of the school was involved, whether as an actor, singer or musician ... over a hundred girls; now that’s community! And did they all get their parts absolutely perfect? Far from it – in this production, the innkeeper’s door got stuck, and though it was not part of the script, the actors were not phased and just worked around it – to the great amusement of all who were watching. But that also mirrors life in its imperfections ... even if not always to amusement.

I want to suggest that just as Christmas is very much a time for community, so too our faith is for community. It is not just about our individual relationship with God, it is also about being part of a wider group. Community is essential to the nature of our faith and the way we live it out, whether we like it or not. We live in an era when individuality is sometimes prized above all else. And yet people constantly seek community, albeit in varying forms.

They may seek it in small doses. Every community has its drawbacks – gossip, traditions that may be hard to break away from, unwelcoming to outsiders and harshly judgmental of its own.

Some people may have “community fatigue”, for no longer do we live in a local village and have all our primary interactions solely within that community, but in this world of the global village we belong to many communities, all requiring and expecting different things of us – family at home, family of origin, family of the spouse, married children and their families, schools that seem to demand total immersion in their activities 7 days a week, the workplace, sports or hobby clubs, circles of friends (perhaps several), the neighbourhood, the acquaintances we meet around town. And everyone expects something of us. Oh... and Church. Yes there’s church too.

And sometimes we are tempted to regard that as just one more community with an expectation of being included in our exhaustive schedules.

Yet those who are actively part of the church – which comes in many sizes and shapes and styles – seem to benefit in a variety of ways:

- Their faith is nurtured and built up, in ways relevant to their everyday lives
- They find themselves in a place where they can question what they believe,
- A place to be challenged, and have relevant questions asked of them,
- A place to raise doubts, concerns, and everyday matters of life and death and all the stuff that happens in between, & find comfort in times of struggle
- A place to be shaped by holiness – not the holiness of the church, which at times is questionable, but the holiness of God

- A place to be drawn to light – not the light of the church, which at times may flicker poorly, but drawn to the light of Christ

For it is both a place and a devoted space in which people encounter God.

Even within large congregations, it is often within smaller groups that people feel part of the community... ministry groups, groups meeting for study, discussion or prayer.

Eugene Peterson, known for his contemporary language translation of the Scriptures called “The Message”, has written a remarkable book with an intriguing title, “Reversed Thunder”. Speaking about the church, (pages 42-43) he writes:

“The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people. Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community. The life of faith revealed and nurtured in the biblical narratives is highly personal but never merely individual: always there is a family, a tribe, a nation – *church*. God’s love and salvation are revealed and experienced in the congregation of the people...

“The gospel pulls us into community. One of the immediate changes that the gospel makes is grammatical: we instead of I; our instead of my; us instead of me.

“Sin, both our own and that of others, drives us into customized selfishness. Separation from God becomes separation from neighbour. The same salvation that restores our relation with God reinstates us in the community of persons who live by faith.”

“Love cannot exist in isolation: away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately: cut off from others it is perverted into greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude: separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith.” (End of quotation)

We may have had bad experiences...

- Boring worship (no excuse for that – how can we make worship of the Creator of the Universe into something boring?!)
- A community that was judgmental / overly critical / unwelcoming or in other ways ungracious, or leadership that was damaging...

...but we ought not let the scars of those experiences develop into hard callouses.

People can remain fixated in imperfect past experiences of the church as an institution or due to an individual person or particular experience being unsatisfactory compared to expectations. Some, especially in traditional Anglican and Catholic circles who found

that boarding school chapel hit the “off” switch, have just never moved beyond an immature dismissal of God and church for the rest of their lives.

I say that based on personal encounter in my years as a priest in several different places, but also based on words of people – even some from this parish, some whom I know will be with us today, who now revel in the fact they have discovered a true and vital faith for themselves, even if somehow it was not nurtured in their earlier boarding school years.

God is not private. Even God is community and is revealed and truly encountered in community. Communities are imperfect so each will have their own distortions (at least these days, when we can move across suburbs and across denominations to different churches, we can pick and choose which distortions we prefer). But left totally to our own devices, we also will be left with our personal distortions, with none of the correcting influences that God intended to be in place in the community called the church, created by the Gospel.

Eugene Peterson continues:

“...It is God’s will that we have a church. The life of faith always and necessarily takes place in a community of persons...” (Page 55)

(Page 54) “The churches of the (Revelation / New Testament) show us that churches are not Victorian parlours where everything is always picked up and ready for guests. They are messy family rooms. Entering a person’s house unexpectedly, we are sometimes met with a barrage of apologies. St. John does not apologize. Things are out of order, to be sure, but that is what happens to churches that are lived in. They are not show rooms. They are living rooms, and if the persons living in them are sinners, there are going to be clothes scattered about, handprints on the woodwork, and mud on the carpet. For as long as Jesus insists on calling sinners and not the righteous to repentance – and there is no indication as yet that he has changed his policy in that regard – churches are going to be an embarrassment to the fastidious and an affront to the upright.”

The community nature of our faith is evident in the Christmas story:

- God chose to send a Saviour as a helpless, vulnerable baby dependant on the community of a family for survival
- The first people God seemingly chose to share the good news of the arrival of Jesus Christ with, was a community of outsiders - shepherds
- Christ was raised in community, which prepared him for ministry
- The Good News of salvation has been passed down from generation to generation through community

We also have a responsibility to nurture faith and pass it on the communities that follow us.

St John of the Cross:

*“The virtuous soul that is alone
Is like the burning coal that is alone.
It will grow colder rather than hotter.”*

Like the infant Jesus whose birth we gather in community to celebrate, so too our faith depends on belonging to a faith community to survive.

As we celebrate Jesus’ birthday this Christmas, and give thanks to God for the faith community to whom we belong, we ask ourselves in what ways we participate in the community of faith established by God’s Spirit, and what God may be calling us to do and be differently this coming year. Amen.