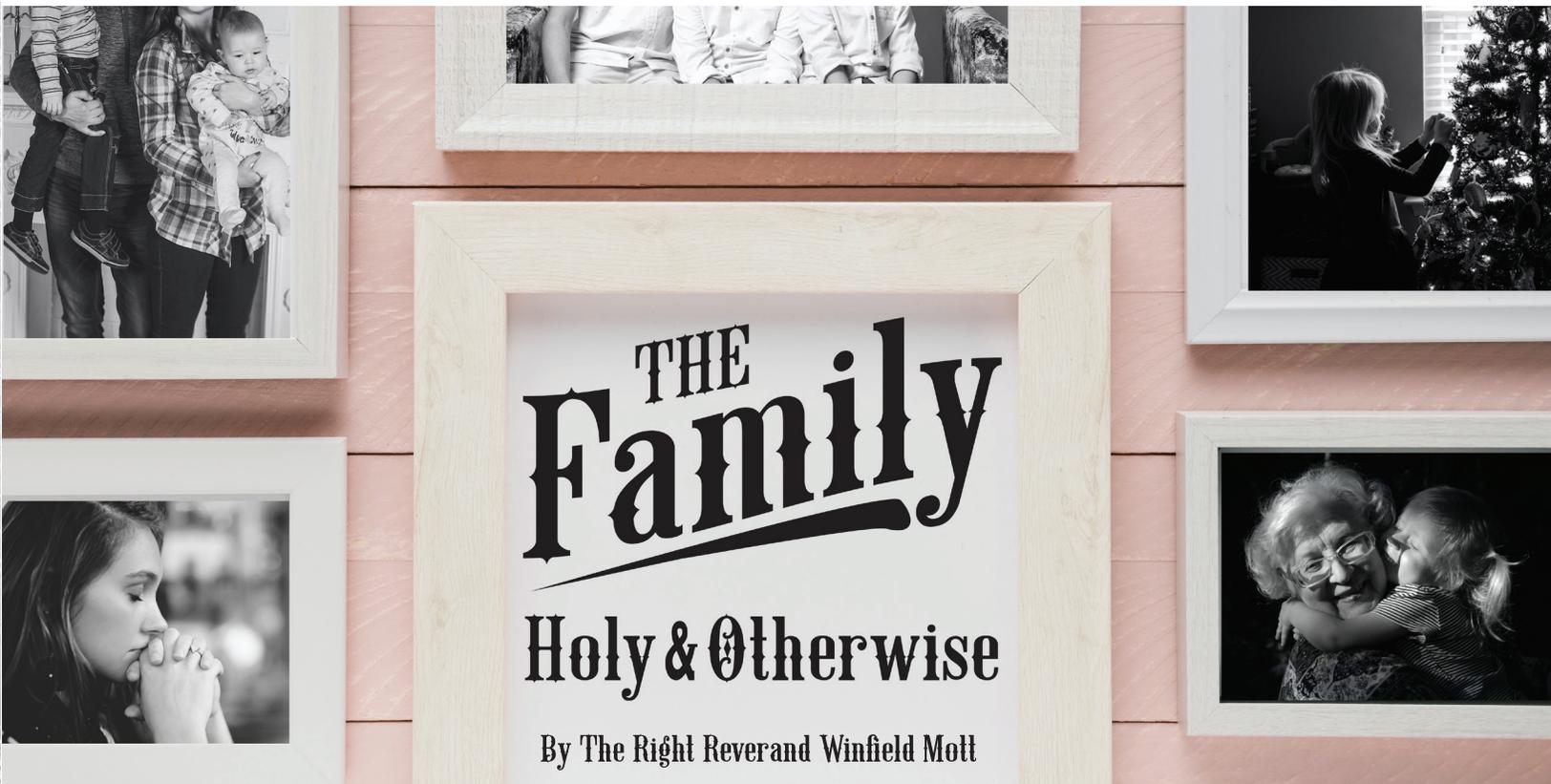


THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



THE
Family
Holy & Otherwise

By The Right Reverend Winfield Mott

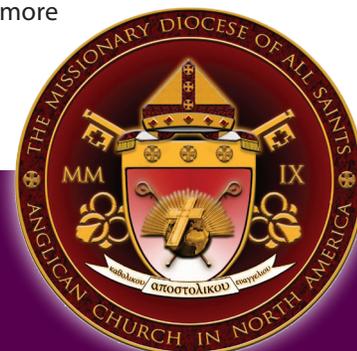
Friends of mine have a sign on their wall: “Always remember, other people think we are a normal family.” Among us all, there is a mostly shared vision about what a family should be about. It includes a lot about love, loyalty, togetherness, accepted values and mutual support.

As the sign implies, my friends were far from being a “normal” family. Nor are they alone. Our vision of the ideal family and our lived experience of families, our own and others, is quite divergent. It becomes most obvious during the Christmas cycle, as the world observes it (post-Halloween to Christmas Day).

This is because a myth has developed about the Christmas celebration. It is embodied in Christmas card art showing a nostalgic scene of extended family arriving at the old family home, a grand old white clapboard place, set in a small town

or a forest, as the snow falls gently around it. Hugs are being exchanged, gifts are sorted out, the promise of a feast is in the air and love and peace abound.

It is a compelling picture. For most of us, it is also quite fictional. Few will experience a real Christmas comparable to it. The distance between the ideal Christmas with an ideal family, and the reality of our individual lives is a significant gulf. The Christmas season is consistently a time when depression spikes upward, as minds try, and fail, to reconcile the myth and the reality. Because few have functional extended families, indeed many have no functional family at all, loneliness and longing abound more than love and peace. Surgeon-General Vivek Murthy calls it a “loneliness epidemic” and



The Convocation of the West Summary Statement

We are a missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition.

comments that it is “more widespread than other major health issues in the U.S.” Christmas season is when it peaks. The natural environment is cold and dark, which doesn’t help. But the bright, sparkling lights, cheerful music and air of false gaiety which appears everywhere may well be worse.

In seeking an explanation for the disparity between the myth and the reality, an explanation hiding in plain view can be found. While seldom discussed or analyzed, our whole society has been in a radical, if unintentional, social experiment for a century or two.

For most of human history, the species has lived in gathered extended families. But today, the transition from extended families in smaller communities, to the urban demographic of a nuclear family, is nearly complete.

Most of the underlying reasons for this are economic: the concentration of employment in urban locations, the disappearance of the family farm, greatly increased mobility in the quest for continued employment, the demise of small family-run businesses in smaller communities, leading to the loss of services such as schools and hospitals all are factors.

Give that process a few generations and we arrive at today, where we overwhelmingly live in nuclear families or alone. A family home as big as five or six people is quite atypical. Grandma’s house is likely to be in assisted living or an Arizona retirement community.

We humans have not really done this before, in all of history. While temporary absence from home is nothing new, to be living all by yourself or with a spouse and maybe one or two children is definitely new. It has placed intense pressure on the nuclear relationship, which is not designed to support all the needs formerly met by extended families. Attempts of all kinds to solve this problem have mostly foundered. And, while it is clearly worse at Christmas, it strongly persists throughout the year.

In this context of epidemic loneliness and stressed nuclear

families, we ought to remember something. Christianity is a family, a very, very large extended family. Our baptism is, among other things, our adoption into the family of God. Our Eucharist is the central meal at our family table. Marriage is a micro-unit within the larger family, reconciliation is the oil which allows all the parts of the family to mesh together without being destructive. Nor is our adoption into the family simply an allegory. The family exists, the adoption is real, the bond is unbreakable, just as in other families. Once baptized into it, you cannot reverse the action. There is no rite of “debaptism,” just as there is no way to divorce yourself from your genetic family. You can deny it, reject it, avoid it, denounce it, but you cannot leave it. Just as you can do

all those actions towards your parents, children or siblings, yet they remain your family despite the alienation.

Two observations which may help.

The first is that what should be a great comfort is instead seen by many as an unfair burden. They have left the Church and are unhappy that they cannot be freed from the indelible mark of their baptism and consequent family membership. The descent into loneliness and alienation comes with the permanent reminder tattooed upon their souls,

following them like a curse or a birthmark. The baptism meant to include them becomes an accusation which they must carry unaided. Once they were a part of God’s people, now they have become no people. God’s family has become an enemy in their minds. I suspect this drives, perhaps mostly at an unconscious level, a lot of hostility towards the Christian community.

If only that community could reach out in love to say, “Come home, the feast is prepared for your return,” and mean it, it would connect with a deep longing on the part of many dechurched people. Sadly, churches often seem full of people like the elder brother in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son, angry at the prodigal for leaving and self-righteous about his return



(Luke 15:11-31). Sometimes, the biggest obstacle to finding Jesus is church people.

The second failure is that the family of God frequently fails to understand its own nature. The parish is intended to be like Grandma’s house, the place where the whole family can gather and celebrate. But just as often, it becomes an institution, a service provider, a consumer choice, or even a club of like-minded individuals who come and go. The realization that we are family has yet to hit many Christians. It is reflected in the life of many parishes where no one expresses or lives in the reality

of our family. Ironic, isn’t it, that the priest is called “Father,” and in many churches, members are known as “sister” or “brother?”

This is not intended to create another unrealistic myth, such as the classic family Christmas at Grandma’s house. The Church is not a “normal” family, either. Or, maybe it almost is. Because most families, big and small, are dysfunctional, and the Church family is no exception. Christ may be the head, but the rest of the earthly section of the Body is composed exclusively of billions of sinners, dysfunctional by definition. In saying we are a family, there is no expectation of perfection.

Yet it does mean some powerful things. Marked indelibly, we are joined forever, to God our Father and to each other, our brother and sisters. We are one family, without human barriers. We are of all races, tribes, nations, languages, ethnicities, orientations, classes and economic circumstances. We are all loved by the Father, unconditionally.

Water, the raw material of baptism, turns out to be thicker than blood after all, contrary to the old saying. We only need to wake up to, and then rejoice in and celebrate with, our big family. This Christmas, remember you are family.



Save the Dates!

The Missionary Diocese of All Saints

General Synod

April 2-5, 2024



St. Paul of the Cross Passionist Retreat Center

www.stpaulretreat.org

23333 Schoolcraft

Detroit, Michigan 48223

located 14 miles from airport (DTW)

Check-in Tuesday between 3-6 p.m. & depart Friday before noon

Advent

A Season of Hopeful Anticipation

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

Image by Valeria Aksakova on Freepik

Last night, I opened up my “new” magazine (I am always about 4 to 5 months behind) and started to read. This is a theological magazine that I often find interesting. It struck me how devoid of hope the first few articles were. I then perused the rest. None of them seemed to anticipate much more than the annihilation of our society, our culture and/or our morality. It made me stop and think.

They say that all the internet outlets for news and “human interest” stories are predicated on an algorithm. This algorithm is to capture an audience by honing in on what attracts the consumer’s attention, and then feeding the consumer with the same type of articles. Thus, if playful kittens captures your attention, you will soon find your YouTube account filled with playful kitten sites. If you are fascinated with war, your YouTube account will be filled with the latest news from Ukraine or Gaza or wherever there may be a conflict.

Although this seems somewhat innocuous, what in reality happens is that the more sensational the title, the more likely you will be to open it, even though the title may be misleading. All the social networks, including Tik Tok, X, Meta, and Instagram, soon discovered that the more the article stimulates outrage or anger, the more clicks the article gets. More and more people find their day flittered away as they go down successive rat holes of links. And the result of these algorithms is a constant negative diatribe that has resulted in a mental health crisis, most especially amongst the most vulnerable of our people – teenagers.

I am fearful that, because this method of doing business is so successful, other news outlets are following the same method.

Let’s face it, this is nothing new. Sensation has always sold, but now it seems to be worse. Hence, my magazine has deteriorated into a succession of negative articles. No longer is it filled with theological discussions like the pro- and anti- arguments presented on women in the priesthood. Now it is the same negative algorithm that sells. And this is a pity.

This is a pity because we are now entering Advent – one of the most hopeful periods in the Christian Church Calendar. Not only are we remembering the first Advent when we anticipated the birth of the Christ Child, we are also anticipating His return. Though the lessons that we hear help us to remember the past, our real attention should be on the future. And here is where our great hope lies.

The early Christians thought that Christ would return quite soon – before most of them would die. As time went on, there was a realization that Christ’s Second Coming would not be immediate. The Church started anticipating a longer wait. And this wait makes sense given what is contained in Holy Scripture and especially the Gospels. God needs time to bring into His Church as many people as possible. He needs time so that we can spread the Gospel for Him. And He needs time so that all the people of the world will know of Christ. All of this time gives all the people a chance to accept Christ and the love of God before Christ’s Second Coming.

But there is something more that we must remember. The early Christians were looking forward to Christ’s return. They wanted Him to return soon. There did not seem to be a dread or fear of that Second Coming back then as we have today. I believe it is

because they knew who they were.

They knew that they believed in Christ. They also knew this Faith saved them. And finally, they knew the present world was not very pleasant. Remember, these Christians were prepared to die, and sometimes the deaths were achieved in the most horrible of ways. For those early Christians, the return of Christ was welcomed. And for them, Advent was the season of joy and preparation.

For a long time, Advent, like Lent, was a time of fasting. It was a time to “get ready”, to be like the wise virgins with their reserve of oil. It was a time to take stock, but it was also a time of joy.

Many people do not understand how one can be joyful and fasting at the same time. But spiritual preparation – prayer, fasting, almsgiving, confession, reconciliation, a change of life – can be a period of great joy. It is not joyful to remember one’s sins or failings; it is joyful to go through a process that will get us onto the right track.

Now let me make this clear lest someone misunderstands: we can never earn our way into heaven, but we can change in order to show our love and appreciation. We can change our behavior because we know our Father does not approve of that behavior in which we engaged. And we change because we love Him and not because, by doing so, we will bribe God or earn our heavenly spot.

When we love someone, we may have a habit that our loved-one finds annoying. It may be wrong, or it may be just a pet peeve, but knowing that someone we love does not like something we do usually will inspire us to change. It is the same for God. We change because we know He is right. But we also change because we love Him. We want our Father to be proud of us. We want to please Him. And we change because we know it makes Him happy.

As you all are quite aware, I have written before about how our faith has changed, i.e. how our Advent has changed from a period of preparation to a period of celebration; how our Christmas has become a feverish celebration; and how the rest of the twelve days of Christmas, including the Epiphany, have lost their celebratory nature and are almost forgotten. Recapturing all of this may take a long time, but recapturing the true nature of Advent should not.

Remember what attracted people to Christianity in the first place. It was the fact that these Christians had found eternal life. They found a new and better way to live. They lived without fear governing their lives. And they lived in total confidence in what they believed. And, as a result, they lived joyful lives. This joy was infectious. And when people wanted to find out more, they found out that Christians possess the ultimate message of hope and joy, a message they were willing to share.

“The Gospel” means “the good news.” It was good news because Jesus paid the ultimate price for us. It was good news because, through His death on the Cross, a cursed existence had been removed from all believers. The news was good because, after paying the ultimate price, Jesus rose from the grave, confirming the promise that we will enjoy the same fate. To be adopted children of God, to have all our sins forgiven, to have the curse removed, and to know that there will be a bodily resurrection and that we will live forever is all good news. And, unlike the Gnostics

who believe in keeping knowledge secret, Christians are willing to share this great news.

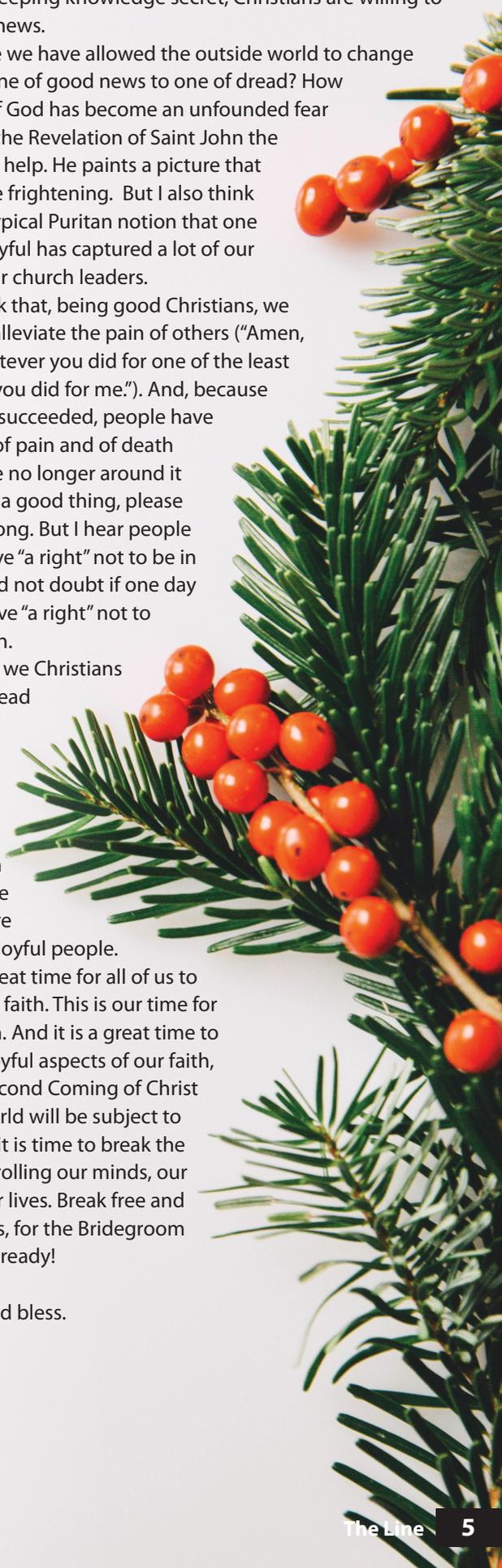
So, how come we have allowed the outside world to change our story from one of good news to one of dread? How come the love of God has become an unfounded fear of Him? In part, the Revelation of Saint John the Divine does not help. He paints a picture that can appear quite frightening. But I also think that the stereotypical Puritan notion that one should not be joyful has captured a lot of our churches and our church leaders.

Further, I think that, being good Christians, we have sought to alleviate the pain of others (“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers, you did for me.”). And, because we have greatly succeeded, people have become fearful of pain and of death because they are no longer around it as before. This is a good thing, please don’t get me wrong. But I hear people say that they have “a right” not to be in pain. And I would not doubt if one day they say they have “a right” not to experience death.

Finally, I think we Christians have lost the thread of our faith. We forget about what Christ has given us. We forget we are not to fear death anymore. And we forget that we are supposed to be joyful people.

Advent is a great time for all of us to take stock in our faith. This is our time for self-examination. And it is a great time to rediscover the joyful aspects of our faith, including the Second Coming of Christ where all the world will be subject to His just rule. So, it is time to break the algorithms controlling our minds, our passions and our lives. Break free and rejoice Christians, for the Bridegroom cometh! And be ready!

Amen and God bless.



Request for a Bishop Coadjutor

The Standing Committee for the Missionary Diocese of All Saints have closed nominations for our next Bishop Coadjutor. Since one of these men will be leading our Diocese in conjunction with our Bishop Ordinary, our other Bishops, our Vicars General and the rest of our Standing Committee, we ask for your prayers that the Holy Spirit will guide us in selecting the right man. I would ask that all our parishes, clergy and laity, pray that God will insure the correct man be selected for this very important job in keeping us within the One, True, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. To this end, Fr. Christopher Parrish of St. Luke's Chapel in the Hills has drafted the following prayer, which I hope will help you:

A Prayer for the Missionary Diocese of All Saints' Selection of a New Bishop Coadjutor

Almighty God, giver of every good gift. Look graciously upon Thy Holy Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a Bishop Coadjutor for the Missionary Diocese of All Saints that we may receive a faithful pastor who will preach the Gospel, care for Thy people, equip us for ministry, and lead us forth in fulfillment of the Great Commission: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God bless,

Fr. Michael Penfield
Vicar General