

England still survives. People by-and-large do not go overboard during Advent. They do not fast anymore, this is true. But they do not celebrate Christmas during Advent. In my town, I live a block away from the main parish church. It is Saint Nicolas. And around the Feast of Saint Nicolas (December 6), the people who live on the street have a celebration, like a block party. They closed down the street, make mulled wine (vin chaud), and serve cakes and bites to eat. That is about the only celebrating I see before Christmas.

Most people buy their Christmas trees just before Christmas day and decorate them about the same time. The city decorates the town over time, starting the first of December. They pipe in music, where only one out of four songs is a Christmas song. But the real celebration happens just before Christmas. The town sets up an ice skating rink for the children, and only for the children, which is free! And right next to the rink is a booth that sells vin chaud and a waffle they only eat at Christmas time called gaufres, which is served with powdered sugar. These things stay up until the Feast of the Epiphany. No one's decorations or Christmas trees are taken down before January 6th. And Christmas is celebrated for twelve days – sometimes longer!

Rod Dreher, in his book *The Benedict Option* hypothesizes that we Christians during this modern age must look to the Middle Ages and model our behavior after the people who lived at that time. He hypothesizes that we should build our lives around the Church and, specifically, monasteries, making them anchors to our faith. In essence, we Christians need to leave the world and build our societies around the Church.

As Christians, it is important that we be witnesses to the world, and I am not sure I agree with Mr. Dreher. However, I do think that one way to be a witness is to resist what the world around us tells us we should do.

In our American society, Christmas has become too much. It is a gluttony of consumption with a promise of peace on Earth, good will toward men REMOVED from God. There is so much pressure and so much hype, especially if you have children. By the time Christmas has come, we are done! We are spent! And nothing makes us happier than to strip the house of its decorations and get on with life. I think it is time to stop the madness. We need to recapture what has been lost.

I know many of you in your churches already have started doing this. You have tried to “bring back Advent.” That is key. Without Advent, without the proper period of preparation, then the Christmas season is lost. Fasting and prayer from the First Sunday of Advent to Christmas Eve is part of it. Meditations are another aspect. Then, once Advent is back, we can re-establish the Anglican Christmas traditions lost after the Tudors. The twelve days of Christmas, including the Feast Days, must be re-established and enjoyed. After all, the twelve days of Christmas are supposed to be joyful – not depressing, moribund and mundane.

What this all comes down to is a very simple proposition, which isn't so simple any more – especially in our society. It is a commitment by each and every one of us Anglicans to live our lives according to the liturgical calendar and not the secular one. It was one of my greatest joys as a rector to live my life by the rhythm of our faith, and it is one of the easiest things to lose through the pressures of our lives outside of church. It takes a conscious effort, but, if done, the joys of Christmas will truly be felt AND understood by all who participates.

And now, may God bless you this new year and bring you into the rhythm of His calendar.

Amen.

Upcoming Clericus 2020

The Anglican Convocation of the West will be holding their annual Clericus in Mesilla, New Mexico, February 18, 19 and 20. Please let our Vicar General know if you are going to attend.

Our guest speaker will be the Reverend Canon Mark Eldredge. Canon Eldredge will be speaking on church revitalization. His program will be made available to each and every parish that believes it may help them evangelize and grow. It, therefore, is very important that someone from each church attends.

This promises to be an excellent Clericus. We hope to see you all there!



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Epiphany: The Light Hurts My Eyes

By Bishop Winfield Mott

The word “epiphany” comes from two Greek words meaning, “to shine a light upon” something. The season of Epiphany is an extension of Christmas, so that the light of the world, which is how St. John in particular describes Christ, can be manifested and applied to our lives. The coming of the Messiah to our earth in order to save creation from, well...us, is of no use to anyone unless they accept the gift of that salvation. Thus, Epiphany might be described as Christmas applied to your life.

That is quite distinct from Christmas as many prefer to celebrate it, with a romantic glow of nostalgia for sleigh bells ringing as the horses trot up the snowy lane to Grandma's house, next to the white-steeple church, aglow with lights inside, showing the manger. The realities of the situation, a baby born in unwelcoming and unhygienic circumstances to an unmarried teenager, forced into town by the unreasonable decree of an authoritarian government seeking to better control and tax the populace, is glossed over.

It's OK. We need our moments to enthusiastically celebrate a glorious and life-changing event in the world without agonizing over the discordant aspects, to let go and imagine life as it should be, not as it entirely is. And the carols we sing, of faithful people, of peace on earth, of the savior born, God and man reconciled, are thankfully just as true as the facts of a fallen, sinful world.

In Epiphany, we have the synthesis of both realities- glorious celebration and difficult situation - applied to your life today, as is, where is. The child will grow up and be baptized as an adult in the Jordan. His baptism, unlike yours and mine, did not include the forgiveness of sin, because Jesus was sinless. Instead, it was an anointing, an ordination and consecration,

as witnessed by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the young man, the entrance into his ministry and the start of the long road to Good Friday and Easter.

Epiphany is a time to also consider our own baptism. It is our new birth into the family of God, and the gift of forgiveness. But, like Jesus, it is also an ordination into our priesthood and coronation into our royal role (see 1 Peter 2:9, for instance). It is the entrance into our vocation to manage the world as the royal stewards of God and to offer our “liturgy,” our life work, to God as priests. It is the start of our pilgrimage on the road of new life leading to theosis, the incorporation into the Body of Christ. Although He will walk the journey with us, make no mistake: it is our journey, our choices of directions and detours, our perceptions of reality.

In the gloomy rainforest of Juneau, Alaska, the children are let out of school onto the playground on the rare occasions when the sun shines. But they mostly come back inside after several minutes, because the sunlight hurts their unaccustomed eyes. It reminds us of C.S. Lewis in the “Great Divorce,” who notes the tourists to heaven from hell are very uncomfortable because everything is so real. Even the grass is too strong for their feet, and the eternal bright shining sun (see Revelation 22) is painful.

It is a popular myth that religion enables its adherents to avoid reality, becoming the “opiate of the people,” as Karl Marx called it. The truth is exactly the opposite. Epiphany allows the bright light of God's saving grace to shine on the garbage dump of my sin, and everyone else's, because it is only in the honest assessment of the reality of who we are that progress can be made. In Epiphany's bright light, I can see my sin clearly and

make my confession. No more need to pretend, to make polite excuses, to avoid certain sensitive subjects. Possessing the brightness of Epiphany's illumination, we can look honestly at what Jesus has given us, and consequently how we ought to live according to his will.

Several contemporary examples of this reality must suffice:

1) We are surrounded by those who proclaim that if we believe, God will cause us to prosper and keep us from all harm. Reality intrudes with the image of 22 Egyptian martyrs kneeling in the clear sunshine of a Libyan beach a few years ago, to be beheaded by ISIS for their Christian faith. The martyrs were oil technicians who had gone to Libya to prosper. They could have renounced Christ and prospered, the choice was theirs. Reality can be stark, and the picture is quite clear. They loved their Lord and made their choice accordingly. The crucified one never promised us a rose garden.

2) We are surrounded by those who want God to bless yet another war. Jesus tells us violence is evil, even anger breaks the Commandment that we should not kill; we are called to love our enemies, not smite them. When Jesus encounters military personnel (the centurions, for instance), he does not condemn the individuals. Jesus did not come "to condemn the world but to save the world" (John 3:17). In fact, the Christian purpose of the military is to spare us from war, not involve us in it. Sweden, for example, has a strong military, which has been successful in keeping Sweden out of any war for over two centuries. In certain circumstances, war may be the unavoidable consequence of failed policy. But it can never be anything Christians glorify or excuse. By definition, it consists of sinful, unchristian acts. When our churches go beyond thanking those who serve, and glorify or validate violence,

The Seven Churches

Usually, I never give a title to my articles, but recently one of our own suggested this title for my next article. And, being the nature of our Convocation, I took it to heart.

Now, some of you may say that this title is inaccurate. After all, we have eight churches in the Convocation. But this is no longer true. I must announce that Saint Michael and All Angels in Kerrville, Texas, has joined the Diocese of the Living Word and will be under the Right Reverend Julian Dobbs.

This announcement is bitter sweet. It is sweet because we want all our churches to find their perfect home, and because Deacon Herman will still be part of the Convocation, having dual citizenship, as it were. But it is also bitter because Saint Michael is precious to us. Like all our churches, Saint Michael has been an important member of the Convocation. And personally I will miss Fr. John Onstott.

While staying with Fr. Onstott, we have had some wonderful discussions. These discussions, in turn, helped stimulate our new, more pro-active direction for our Convocation. Through

state-sponsored or otherwise, they stray beyond the Christian pale. The reality is that God hates any violence or killing, as Jesus makes very clear.

3) We are surrounded by those who would seek to persuade us with fake news. It is not a new phenomenon. But it is bearing false witness. For some reason, this Commandment seems to attract "respectable people." Gossip and hurting other people's reputations through fabricated allegations or trashing a person, group or ideology using misinformation is always wrong and as serious as breaking any other Commandment. The bright light of reality is of utmost importance in alleging bad things about others. To accept unproven allegations about anybody, or any movement, is to enable people to sin by breaking this Commandment.

Beyond these examples, all of life lies exposed to Epiphany's searchlights. Because Jesus is truth, Christians can afford to be honest. Indeed, our credibility depends on it. In a culture where religion is relegated to a corner called "whatever you want it to believe," and reality is considered relative, Epiphany is starkly counter-culture. The greatest reality of all history is the well-documented fact of the Resurrection. It did not happen only if you want it to, or believe it did. It happened as a simple, historical fact. That powerful and central act of Christ assures us of the gift of salvation, and sets us free to consider all else in life in the brightest honest illumination.

The brightest light of Epiphany shines right here, all shadows banished. That reality is cause for celebration, endless joy, and relief from anxiety. Honestly.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. Isaiah 60:1

By Vicar General Fr. Michael Penfield

these discussions, we learned about ReVive, which will be presented at our next Clericus. Also, through these discussions, we decided to expand and have a session for church music, which we are now planning for October in Seattle. And through these discussions, we have decided to have a session on church education and Catechesis, for which we are still in the initial planning stages.

Although many of you may be saddened by this "departure," the nature of the Convocation is to always welcome those who are not part of the Convocation or have left our group but still want to attend our functions. They are part of our family, both as Christians and as Anglicans, and there will always be a place for them in the Convocation as a friend, as a brother or sister, and as a member, if they so choose. So, please continue to pray for St. Michael, for Deacon Herman, for Fr. John, and for all the parishioners. May the Lord bless them and use them mightily.

Twelfth Night

But there is a second part of this month's article, which I think is quite important. This year I spent Christmas in Amsterdam, which in and of itself was quite interesting and will be the subject of my next article. The rest of the time I spent in France. I can tell you that there is a marked difference between the ways France and the United States celebrates Christmas. And this, in turn, is a reflection of the US being settled by England.

Originally, England celebrated Christmas quite differently than we do today. First, Advent was a time of fasting. It was just like Lent. This is why the color at Advent is penitential purple. In fact, Eastern Orthodox Churches still call for fasting during this period. They call it a "lesser fast," being that Lent is the "great fast." Then, starting with Christmas Eve, the Christmas festivities began. During the Tudor period, the Christmas celebration was quite extensive, and no one loved it more than King Henry VIII.

From Christmas Day until the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th – during the twelve days of Christmas – the Church called for a period of celebration. Gifts were exchanged, that is true, but feasting and merriment was the hallmark of this period. The house was decked in greens (but no Christmas trees yet), mostly holly, ivy, and rosemary. Very little work was performed. And although every Holy Day was observed, merrymaking was expected. This merriment culminated in the last night of festivities, the Twelfth Night (which also was the title of one of Shakespeare's comedies), which is Epiphany Eve. In fact, during the festivities, the wealthy homes would have huge feasts. Any food leftover was then doled out to the poor. And this is where we get the expression, "on the dole." Interestingly enough, New Years Eve was not important; it was barely noticed at all.

So, from a purely religious perspective, the Christmas celebrations started with Midnight Mass, followed by the Feast of St. Stephen on December 26th, Holy Innocents on December 28th, the Circumcision of Christ on January 1st, and culminated in the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. These were all



By Vicar General Fr. Michael Penfield

observed. In fact, some of the carols and hymns we sing today were sung then. One of the hymns we still sing, the Coventry Carol, if you listen to the words carefully, is quite a haunting tribute to the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Another, the Boar's Head Carol, was sung while Henry VIII was presented with the best part of the boar, its head, to feast upon.

So then, what happened, you may ask, to Christmas? Basically two events happened, which were peculiar only to England and not to typically Catholic countries like France. The first event particular to England was Oliver

Cromwell and the Roundheads. When they took power, being Puritans and Sabbatarians, they abolished Christmas. All celebrations were made unlawful. When the crown was restored, Christmas came back, but in a rather anemic fashion. All the celebrations and Feast Days associated with the twelve days of Christmas were mere shadows of what they had been. Christmas limped along until the second event – the Industrial Revolution – almost

killed Christmas completely in England.

The Industrial Revolution nearly killed Christmas by ignoring it and by making it like any other workday. Unlike typically Catholic countries, even when ruled by a rabidly secular government like France, because of its Puritan, Sabbatarian sensibilities, the English were quick to make the twelve days of Christmas like any other days. Slowly, people were not given the day off from work and little celebrating was done, especially by the working class or poor.

One author was appalled by this trend. In 1843 he wrote a short book as a reaction this trend in England. The author was Charles Dickens and the novella was *A Christmas Carol*. This novella is credited with almost single-handedly saving Christmas in England. Victorian traditions of Christmas trees and celebrating Christmas became fashionable, but what was lost was the true nature of Advent and the Christmas season, as opposed to just Christmas Day.

In France, as secular as it is, much of what was lost in