

Complacency!

First Sunday After Christmas

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I would like to pick up one phrase from this morning's gospel reading: *the people were filled with expectation*. No matter where I tried and go with this sermon, I keep coming back to it. It seems to be a message of most importance for us as a church, community and as individuals at the start of a new year.

Perhaps also, the opposite of expectation is complacency and in my sojourning since ordination, I have experienced churches which, for whatever reason, have a culture that they have already arrived and as such have no expectations for the future. Observing as an outsider coming in, the church's focus is backward on past glory rather than forwards with the expectation of something more. We point back to a particular time, a golden age, and say this is what it should be like. This is as good as it gets.

One of our problems as a diocese is that many churches, for one reason or another are in decline, and many are living in the past without an expectation of what more God can do. Our passage from Isaiah this morning follows a theme of many of the prophets. It points to a restoration in which past glories will fade into insignificance compared with the experience of God which is to come. This is the promise of the whole of Scripture, the unifying theme of Heaven - the new place where death, mourning and tears will be no more, and God will be with his people.

This is the meaning of Emmanuel, the name designated for Jesus before his birth. This is the purpose of the whole Jesus story and if we are to understand anything of God's promises, it is this, that heaven is open to us. This is the message of a Christian funeral, that there is the promise of something better for those who have died in faith.

Complacency on the other hand, *says this is as good as it gets*. It is perhaps the most un-Christian or even anti-Christian sentiment. When I am complacent, I am looking for nothing more, for nothing better.

You will often hear me describe faith as a journey. One of the dangers of viewing faith as a singular conversion experience is that it leads to complacency; it leads to the idea that we have arrived. It is not that I dispute the power of the conversion experience or the importance of sudden decision to walk in the way of Christ, but an emphasis on this, sees new birth, in terms of birth being the end rather than the beginning of something new. Birth is important, but the growth that follows opens up so much more. Paul speaks of his anguish when he finds the congregations not growing, still dependent on milk rather than meat.

One of my joys is seeing the challenge that people in the older age group have, when they take up and discover the world of computers and the Internet. Not quite ready for rocking chairs on the porch yet, they wish to see and experience this new world that they have only heard about.

But if the physical world is like this, the faith world is even more so. No doubt the people of Samaria were happy with their lot as Christians - they had found Jesus, sought to walk in his ways and been baptised in his name. But Peter and John brought them something new. They brought to them the gift of the Holy Spirit. They open new doors up for them and faith was something more. This was more than just the baptism in the name of Jesus, but the affirmation by God the Holy Spirit of their faith, and their equipping in a new and positive way for mission and ministry.

A word of caution is important: I am not proposing that we be like the Athenians who were always looking for something new, yet we must be prepared to anticipate something new rather than remaining where we are.

At the Jordan, John the Baptist says quite plainly - This is nothing compared to what is to come - John, the last of the prophetic figures in the Old Testament thinking, foresaw something new in the person of Jesus. This was not just a *washing away* of sin by water, but a *purging* with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And the gospel writer notes that there was a sense of expectation amongst the people. As we study church history, it is when the church is most expectant, that it is most successful. It makes the biggest impact on the people around it.

So what about us here on the Yorke Peninsula:

- ◆ *Are we living on the edge with regard to faith?*
- ◆ *Do we have an expectation for something bigger and better?*
- ◆ *What will this new year hold for us?*

I am firmly convinced that faith is a dynamic experience and like everything living and that when our faith experience stops growing, it starts dying. So our expectation should be for a new experience with God each day, month and year -indeed each season.

So, at this significant starting point, may I encourage you to look back over the journey so far, with the expectation that the future holds something new and greater for us. Of course, this is the essential Christian message, that Isaiah is pointing to in the first reading. As Christians, there is a certainty that is beyond death. Take these words of prophet to heart:

*But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Let us anticipate the new and brighter future, in which God will move among us and do many great things. Let us not be satisfied that this is *as good as it gets*, but pursue all that God has to offer us. Our greatest enemy is the sense of complacency that comes from the feeling that we have arrived.

Take a moment now to reflect on the past, and in the quietness of this place, this space, claim from God something new for this year.

AMEN