

Sermon for Nine Lessons and Carols 19 Dec 2010 Nicosia

Our resident historian here tells me you have never had a sermon at Nine Lessons and Carols except for last year, but that was just the Bishop. If that is correct, sorry about that, because you're getting one tonight. I need to share with you some insights into our faith and practices.

Yesterday in Larnaca the Bishop preached about dreams and asked if dogs and cats have dreams, and the answer of course is that they do. What they dream is still a matter of discussion. Well, hold that thought.

You know, animals played a big part in that first Christmas scene. It's all recorded in our songs:

In "Away in the Manger, "the cattle are lowing"

In the "Little Drummer Boy," "the ox and the lamp kept time."

You can add more to that list on your own, I'm sure. But a favourite carol of some has always been "The Friendly Beasts." Maybe you know it, maybe you don't.

Jesus, our brother, kind and good,
Was humbly born in a stable rude;
And the friendly beasts around Him stood.
Jesus, our brother, kind and good.

"I," said the Donkey, shaggy and brown,
"I carried His mother up hill and down;
I carried His mother to Bethlehem town."
"I," said the Donkey, shaggy and brown.

"I," said the Cow, all white and red,
"I gave Him my manger for His bed;
I gave Him my hay to pillow His head."
"I," said the Cow, all white and red.

"I," said the Sheep, with the curly horn,
"I gave Him my wool for His blanket warm;
He wore my coat on Christmas morn."
"I," said the Sheep, with the curly horn.

"I," said the Dove, from the rafters high,
"I cooed Him to sleep that He should not cry;

We cooed Him to sleep, my mate and I."
"I," said the Dove, from the rafters high.

Thus every beast by some glad spell,
In the stable dark was glad to tell
Of the gift he gave Emmanuel,
The gift he gave Emmanuel.

The only problem I have with that song which I love? Where are the dogs and cats? From a very early age I pictured dogs and cats at the first Christmas. Why not? Especially dogs.

I admit it: I used to be totally a dog person. I have been converted to love both cats and dogs thanks to the love shown me by our cats as well as dogs. You may have heard of "Dog Theology" vs. "Cat Theology." In Dog Theology "You feed me. You pet me You shelter me. You love me. You must be God!" In "Cat Theology" "You feed me. You pet me. You shelter me. You love me. I must be God."

A Far Side cartoon once depicted a scientist announcing a breakthrough in understanding cat language: "They say only two things: 'Where's my dinner?' and 'Everything here is mine.'" Maybe that is what they dream about.

The Roots of the Advent Wreath...

Pre-Christian peoples who lived far north and who suffered the archetypal loss of life and light with the disappearance of the sun had a way of wooing back life and hope. Primitives do not separate the natural phenomena from their religious or mystical yearning, so nature and mystery remained combined. As the days grew shorter and colder and the sun threatened to abandon the earth, these ancient people suffered the sort of guilt and separation anxiety which we also know.

Their solution was to bring all ordinary action and daily routine to a halt. They gave in to the nature of winter, came away from their fields and put away their tools. They removed the wheels from their carts and wagons, festooned them with greens and lights and brought them indoors to hang in their halls. They brought the wheels indoors as a sign of a different time, a time to stop and turn inward. They engaged the feelings of cold and fear and loss. Slowly, slowly they wooed the sun-god back. And light followed darkness. Morning came earlier. The festivals announced the return of hope after primal darkness.

This kind of success—hauling the very sun back: the recovery of hope—can only be accomplished when we have had the courage to stop and wait and engage fully in the winter of our dark longing. Perhaps the symbolic energy of those wheels made sacred has escaped us and we wish to relegate our Advent wreaths to the realm of quaint custom or pretty decoration.

Symbolism, however, has the power to put us directly in touch with a force or an idea by means of an image or an object—a "thing" can do that for us. The symbolic action bridges

the gulf between knowing and believing. It integrates mind and heart. As we go about the process of clipping our greens and winding them on a hoop, we use our hands, we smell the pungent smell that fills the room, we think about our action. Our imagination is stirred.

Imagine what would happen if we were to understand that ancient prescription for this season literally and remove-just one-say just the right front tire from our automobiles and use this for our Advent wreath. Indeed, things would stop.

Our daily routines would come to a halt and we would have the leisure to incubate. We could attend to our precarious pregnancy and look after ourselves. Having to stay put, we would lose the opportunity to escape or deny our feelings or becomings because our cars could not take us away to the madness in the town and the mall.

The great advantage we have as 21st century Christians is that we know the ending of the Christ story. Mary did not know it all. Joseph did not know it all. John the Baptist did not know it all. The shepherds certainly did not know what was to come of this little child they were called by angels to come and see. Nor did the 3 wise men, even though they believed him to be a king.

But we know.

There was so much hope, and so much joy in that first Christmas. Even though any birth is joyful and somewhat miraculous, but this one was exceptional. People of faith remembered the prophecies, and believed that this child was indeed the messiah, the chosen one of God, come to the chosen people. But in fact God revealed himself not just to the chosen people of God, but to every one, through the epiphany that we will celebrate 12 days after Christmas.

We know.

We know that Jesus was born to reconcile all humanity, past, present, and future, with God the creator. We know about his life on earth as a child, and his incredible works of healing and teaching in his years of ministry.

We also know about the dark days following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We know about his betrayal by Judas. We know of his trial, his crucifixion, and his death.

But even more, we know about his rising again from the dead, his days of revelation before his disciples and followers, and his great ascension into heaven. And we know that he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us.

And although those events were two thousand years ago, we know that he is with us still. We met him today in the holy Eucharist, in the consecrated bread and the wine as he told

us to do. We meet him in our prayers. We know we can have a personal relationship with God, revealed to us in Jesus the Christ, and present with us in the Holy Spirit. We know him as a person, living still.

And although we know that every human child that is born is going to die, we also know that because of this little baby that we honour and remember in this carol service tonight, they shall not die forever, but shall have everlasting life, forgiven of all transgressions.

As 21st century Christians we are blessed to know that the birth we celebrate in this service was the beginning of a life without end. For that we can only give perpetual thanks to God.

Because we know. Amen.