

## **St Andrew's on The Terrace 10am Advent 4 Sun Dec 24 2017 'Waiting for the right moment'**

### **Zechariah's Song**

**Luke 1: 67,68, and 76-80**

<sup>67</sup> John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: <sup>68</sup> "Praise be to the God of Israel, who has come to his people and redeemed them. <sup>76</sup> And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way, <sup>77</sup> to give the people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, <sup>78</sup> because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven <sup>79</sup> to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." <sup>80</sup> And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

### **Contemporary reading**

**POMPALLIER LECTURE 2007: THE GREEN SEASON**

(for the Catholic Institute of Theology, Aotearoa/New Zealand) by Joy Cowley

I believe that every soul comes from God and can never be lost to God. I believe that we all have that little spark of the Divine in us that yearns to be reunited with God. I believe that from time to time in human history, larger sparks of the Divine have come to help and inspire us in our struggles. We call those people saints. Two thousand years ago, the great fire of God joined us in the person of Jesus Christ. He went through everything we could ever expect, including torture and death, to show us the truth of the way. I believe that he still companions us every part of the way and his love has the power to dissolve our fears. When we know that, we are in the Kingdom of Heaven, which in the Judaic tradition means enlightenment

### **'Waiting for the Right Moment'**

In the Gospel reading for today we heard the hymn of praise from Zechariah, priestly father of John the Baptist who has been waiting for almost 9 months, let alone all those years previously when he and Elizabeth were longing for a child. He's been waiting all that time to have his say. The story goes that Zechariah was struck dumb at the announcement of John's birth and was only able to speak when he named the boy born 'John', nine months on down the world. I don't know if he was a patient man, but Zechariah still had to wait.

Perhaps it is a carryover from being a child and looking forward to presents, but still the anticipation of Christmas just around the corner is the major feeling for me each year. As an adult, this is tempered somewhat by needing shops and businesses to stay open long enough for me to get done what I need to get done before the Great NZ shutdown!

In some ways, it is of course, an artificial waiting, for this event has already happened. I have to speak to myself sternly about lighting a Christ candle about 8pm on Christmas Eve, that waiting till midnight is not that big a deal. For after all, we all know the baby is already born, the Christ is already here, and we strongly suspect that Jesus was not born right on midnight on the 25 of December anyway! Sometimes we can over-hesitate, waiting on the brink and, like Hamlet, wait too long on the threshold of a new moment. We over-think the situation, fear the change coming, resisting the upheaval, or the new idea. Then we find the moment of opportunity has passed and it is gone.

Hillel the Elder was a famous Jewish religious leader, one of the most important in Jewish history. He's associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Hillel is known for two famous sayings, one of which is now a fridge magnet so it must be famous. He said "If I am not for myself who is for me? And being for my own self, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?" . That's the fridge magnet part: "If not now, when?"

Hillel is urging his hearers not to postpone duty, but in the context in which I'm thinking, I wonder if it can be applied to our duty to our ourselves, particularly to our own spiritual growth. Hillel also made

the pertinent point elsewhere that sometimes we decide we will do something in that vague moment when we have the free time to do so, but he asked, what if the so called free time never materialises?

It can be like that with spiritual practice. We pay the bills because there's a deadline at the end of the month. We eat because we're hungry. We take medications to keep symptoms at bay. We meet people because the appointment has been scheduled. But who guards the time we need to spend on spiritual growth for our own refreshment health and delight?

The time we find most valuable spiritually may not be spent in organised spiritual activities. It can include church, a discussion group, a social gathering connected with a faith community. But equally, and sometimes more importantly, we grow spiritually when we make our own appointments with ourselves; or perhaps a beach or a bush walk or a paintbrush, bicycle or book or garden. That's when Hillel's question kicks in for me: "If not now, when?"

A supervisor once advised me to make appointments with myself in my diary, so that when people asked if a time was free, I could look there and say "No sorry, I have an appointment at that time." It is a hard discipline to keep especially when there aren't that many other free moments to offer people!

Then as well as time, you need the space. Sometimes a noisy coffeeshop works as long as it isn't where your friends or workmates come – even amid the noise, your thoughts can form an oasis in what Joy Cowley calls the 'desert of tired words'. Or you may have to drive to a beach or a bushy place or an empty church to get quiet around you. I am hoping as I speak that you are thinking of a special place you have created, along with a particular time of day or night or week where you go occasionally, perhaps frequently or even constantly for refreshment. If not, get thinking, find your place where you can wait on the Spirit to refresh and energise you.

When I first got a cell phone, it was a new concept to me that they need re charging. The landline just sat on the wall and was always there! No need to be charged, no need to have enough reception, no need to be pre-paid or on a plan (except for the monthly bill).

Our spiritual life needs maintaining more like a cell phone than a landline – just as a mobile phone needs money, energy and reception, we need a place, a time and our own hearts ready and receptive.

It used to be you could just rock up to church and plug unto the mains supply and others would do it all for you, just like a landline to God. Now life is more complicated and more individual and you need to find your time, your space and open your heart to whatever will.

This isn't a lecture about being more diligent, it's a reminder of that yearning which is already inside you to be connected to the spiritual flow of our universe. What sis Joy Cowley say in the contemporary reading? "...we all have that little spark of the Divine in us that yearns to be reunited with God." You know already that you want to connect, you remember other times when you did connect, or when you tried and failed. All you need to do is start again. There are former reflections and orders of service on our St Andrew's website which might help. Within them are suggestions of helpful books too – look through the contemporary readings for example. That might be a good holiday exercise when you might have more time than usual or at least more unstructured time.

It's a reminder that Christmas isn't about waiting for someone else to do something; for Mary to get on and have that baby, for the wise ones to get to the stable, for the shepherds to listen to the angels.

Christmas is a time for us to recognise the right moment for us to connect with the Spirit of the ages.

And you know, actually, the right moment is always now.

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