

Christmas Midnight

Right, so it's Christmas Eve with less than an hour to Christmas Day. If you haven't bought that present or that gift or that turkey or the ham - then it is too late. Relax now, catch your breath, think about what this Feast, this festival is all about; why you have come to Church at this late hour, why you are willing to bellow out these same old favourite carols that you have sung for twenty, thirty, fifty or many more years? Why?

As T S Eliot says in his famous poem *The Journey of the Magi*: "There was a birth, certainly". Yes, that is what we celebrate - the birth of a baby. But not any old baby. No, this birth was the coming of God into our world in human form. Emmanuel - God with us. The prophets foretold this birth; Bethlehem, the place of this birth was foretold, as well; as was the character of God's mother, Mary.

Yet when he came, when he was born, how ill prepared was the world to receive him. How ill prepared are we to receive him today. A lovely poem by Thomas Ford tells of how we prepare for our human feasts and festivals; *But at the coming of the King of Heaven, All's set at six and seven: We wallow in our sin, Christ cannot find a chamber in the inn. We entertain him always like a stranger, And as at first still lodge him in the manger.*

At the beginning of this service Pat carried in what is call 'the Bambino' and we placed it in the manger. The Italianated phrase "bambino" is used to describe the model of the baby Jesus because it was Francis of Assisi, in Italy, who introduced the Manger Scene into our Christmas Worship. Our manger has a small 40-watt bulb giving some light but the original stable and manger must have been a pretty dark on that first Christmas night. And into that dark night - dark in the literal as well as the spiritual sense - came the Light of the World. His mother, Mary described him as the "light to lighten the gentiles," and that is what Jesus has come to do - to bring light to **ALL** people. In my sermon notes I've printed the word "all" both in uppercase and bold because so often we think that Jesus has come for me and those like me but not for those who are so different from me. Jesus is the light of world - the light who came for **ALL** of us.

Now when we talk about light inevitably we get told jokes about how many different sorts of people are required to change a light bulb. How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb? Well, the answer varies. In a truly Anglican sort of way we could answer, "it all depends." If the light bulb is one of those incandescent bulbs, the answer is, "at least one politically incorrect person." If the light bulb is an energy saving one, then answer might be, "one to screw it in, one to genuflect, and one to chant, "the Light of Christ." Or perhaps there is another typically judgemental Christian answer, "I'm afraid us Anglicans would not use the word screw."

Some parishes use a 40-watt bulb instead of a plaster-of-Paris model of the baby in their manger scenes. When they do this the light bulb becomes an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. This would also be the case with the light bulb behind those rather tacky Jesus nightlights. Then perhaps the light bulb getting screwed in and turned on is something like the light of Christ in our lives. In which case, the answer to the question, "How many Anglicans does it take to screw in a light bulb?" is this: IT TAKES ALL OF US. rpt

So what is my point in incorporating this hoary old chestnut of a joke in my Christmas sermon? Well, I believe the light of Christ whose coming we celebrate at Christmas, is too great, too important, too wonderful to be left in the hands of one person - like the bishop, or group of people - like the clergy, or a party of people - the Evangelicals or the Anglo-Catholics. We **all** have to see that it is screwed in and that the current is flowing.

The light is important to all of us. This is because the light of Christ shines on and through the Scriptures and lights up their meaning for us. It is because the light of Christ shines in our minds and hearts, and all our thoughts and experiences become illuminated by that light. It is because the light of Christ shines in the life and prayers of witnesses in the church and by that light we see God's grace in the Saints, and God's truth in our faith. The light of Christ is too big

for any grouping in the church to handle on its own. If the light is to get power, **everyone** has to help.

So there it is: The Anglican Church in Southern Africa and the Anglican Communion worldwide needs **all** its members to help light up this dark Christmas night. All of us who call ourselves Anglican. In Southern Africa, we are 32 dioceses. We are high church, low church, broad church, not much church at all. We are evangelical, sacramental, pentecostal, analytical, traditional, experimental, progressive, liberal, modern, ancient, post-modern, old, young, men and women, children.

The reason we **all** hang out together as **Church**, as people of God, is that we have the sense that no matter how well any one of us is at screwing in the bulb and turning on the light, it will take all sorts and conditions of people in the human family even to begin to do the job properly. And of course, we also know that the light does not depend on only us Anglicans doing the work of screwing in the bulb. (That's why we get along with our Church Unity Commission partners and other Christians.)

The light is already present, bulb or no bulb. Jesus was born over 2000 years ago. It is just that we must be part of making that light real in the lives of all those who have been without light. The real reason for being part of something that includes those who are so different from ourselves (however we define that) is that they and we are all part of the one great effort that is also God's desire; that we all live in the light.

Anyone who will lend a hand at screwing in the light bulb is invited to do so.

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord **shone** around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all** the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among **all** people!"