

December 22, 2005



Dear Friends,

My first pastoral letter at Christmas! In my mind this is “the first Christmas” in many respects. The first year I shall be preaching at Christmas services, the first Christmas in my new Ontario home, the first year I shall attempt to cook a Christmas dinner, the first Christmas I shall be skidding around on my own wheels.... Somehow we use Christmases to mark the great changes in our lives. The first Christmas with a new baby is a big deal. The first Christmas after losing a spouse is hard to face. The first Christmas with a new minister is “different.” But of course this *isn't* the first Christmas. The first Christmas was well over 2000 years ago, and the changes to our circumstances, which we register each year on Dec. 25th are nothing to the Great Change that that Child brought into the world, and nothing to the Great Change that the decision to take on flesh, and enter our human condition, represented in the Life of God.

What the first Christmas means for us, is that One came into the world, who was uniquely qualified to show God’s nature to us, and to restore our nature – to “fit us for heaven” as the carol says, “to live with [God] there.” In the past, prophets and temple-worship were the ways given to God’s people to understand God’s mind, and to have communion with Him. But in Jesus Christ, God went much further toward Self-disclosure and communion with the human race. In Jesus Christ, God did something different than had ever been done before. The coming of Jesus Christ meant a sea-change, not only in the ways humanity had of knowing God, but a sea-change within God Himself. Consider that Jesus Christ, resurrected with the wounds of his crucifixion still visible, went, *in our flesh*, to reign with God on high, and you will see that this decision on the part of God, to take on humanity, was no casual thing. On the first Christmas, God wedded human nature to Himself, and that move can never be reversed; if it changed things for us, imagine how it changed things *for God!*

Christmas should be so much more than a date on the calendar, laden with traditions that make it a memorable time for measuring the life-changes that befallen us. It represents the Great Change that has entered the world in Jesus Christ. The change that Jesus brought was threatening to many people. It was threatening to Mary and Joseph, and the reason they appear in the story as figures “full of grace,” is that, despite their fear, they were able to embrace what God was doing. It was threatening to Herod, but because he could *not* welcome God’s action in Jesus, history records him as the enemy of God. T. S. Eliot imagines that it was threatening to the wise men, those Eastern sages committed to their own religion of Zoroastrianism. The Birth they witnessed made them “no longer at ease...in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.” They had worshipped at the Christ-child’s cradle, and after that, it was difficult to go back.

Jesus brings change into the world, change that can be threatening to us too. Christmas puts us on the alert that God has come seeking *us*; if we are the sort of people who like to keep God at arm’s length, then chances are, we will not welcome the kind of change that Jesus brings. Christmas gives us fair notice that God is about to “cast down the mighty from their seats and lift up the lowly” (as Mary put it); if we see ourselves as the lowly and the needy then good news! Good News! But if we see ourselves as strong and complete in ourselves, then there is more threat than joy for us in Christmas.

Christmas measures the changes in our lives, but it also comes to change us. My wish for all of us at Westminster-St. Paul’s is that we should find peace and joy and a reason to celebrate this Christmas, but most of all that we should recognise the source of true change which God gives to our broken selves and our broken world in the coming of Christ, and that, with all our hearts, we should welcome him.