

Poems! Pilgrimage! And, Petition! (By Bishop Cam Venables)



Bishop Cam 'on pilgrimage' climbing Mt Ossa, Tasmania

I think any lyrics written by the English hymn writer Brian Wren are worth exploring and reflecting upon, and the Anglican hymn book *Together in Song* has a good number of these. In Hymn 653, Wren affirms that, 'This is a day of new beginnings, time to remember, and move on, time to believe what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that's gone.' I think it's a great hymn to sing in the season of Advent, as we look forward to celebrating the new beginning of Immanuel – God with us.

Last weekend thirteen people in our Diocese were Ordained at St John's Cathedral, and through this they have been commissioned into new chapters of life and ministry. Susan, Erika, Danni, Rick, Scott and Beryl began the service as lay people, but left as deacons. While, Deb, Zoe, Rosemary, Peter, Stephen, Timothy, and Bronwyn began the service as deacons, but left as priests. But it's not only those who have been Ordained who experience new beginnings in life and ministry. Surely each day is a new beginning! As the sun comes up, and the night comes to an end, there is an invitation for us to be thankful and participate in what we believe to be the God-given gift of a new day. Similarly, we can think of each year as a gift and wonder how best to live the next twelve months.

Most of us at some stage would have made New Year resolutions, with the thought that if we follow these our lives will become healthier and more fulfilling. We might resolve to walk for half an hour each day, and read a new book each fortnight. We might set up a space for prayer and use that space at the beginning or end of each day. We might get involved with some voluntary work, so that for a couple of hours a week we're helping another person, without the thought of being paid. We might resolve to learn a new language, or start playing a musical instrument...the possibilities are huge.

I wonder if part of the gift of Advent – this short season before Christmas – is an opportunity to prayerfully look back at the previous twelve months, glean some wisdom, and seek guidance from God about what could helpfully give focus next year. So, in the midst of our preparations for Christmas – the Christmas cards being written, the gifts being bought and wrapped, the menus being planned, and the invitations to family and friends...can there also be time to think about some things that will intentionally give shape to our lives next year? I offer you where I'm currently at in responding to the challenge of this, as an invitation for you to consider what might be helpful in preparing for your 2019 journey. Over the last year, my family and I have experienced some significant milestones: Kate and I celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary; our youngest child graduated from high school; and...my dad died after a short time of illness.

I've thought about these, and other things, in the prayerful reflection space of travelling. Out of this, three themes have emerged that will intentionally give shape to life and ministry for me next year. They are: 'Poems! Pilgrimage! And, Petition!' I think 'Poems' because I find that poems and song lyrics often express important things about experience and faith, and with an economy of words. We use words to express meaning and I want to attend more carefully to the words I read, and the words I write. I'm drawn to the experience and language of 'Pilgrimage' because there is something enormously life giving about recognising the presence and activity of God as we journey. God present with us while watching a sunrise on the beach, and present with us as we work our way through household chores. God with us while hiking in the mountains, and with us while waiting for the bus to Brisbane! And, 'Petition' because...I've got a reasonable sense of how to journey with people and give

support, but I need to better understand what has caused them to need that support. I think some significant decision makers in our society have lost sight of the Gospel understanding that everybody matters...and I have lost sight of the importance of advocacy. So, a year of 'Petition' focus will helpfully recalibrate things. Inevitably the silent 'P' weaving these three themes together is 'prayer'. Some prayers end up being poems, and some poems become prayers. Inevitably pilgrimage engages with God through prayer, and in the journey we travel, there will be nudges from the Spirit to become part of the struggle to make the world more just.

So, these themes suggest where I sense God is leading me to give focus next year – what about you? If you had to name three helpful themes that would give focus for you next year, what would they be? If you're happy to share them – I'd love to hear what they are! Facebook: @Cam Venables

Staying awake this Advent season (By The Rev'd Canon Linda McWilliam)

As children we had an amazing sense of wonder; we were fascinated by the world and all of its creation. The world was full of mystery and awe. Somehow, as we grew older the natural gift of wonder God gave us as children grew tired with the busyness and anxieties of life. We have somehow managed to let wonder go to sleep. Jesus tells us to, 'Stay awake (Matthew 24:42).' Advent says, 'Wake up and realise the gifts of love you have received.' Spirituality says, 'Wake up' and 'withdraw from the busyness of daily life, and to wake up to the spiritual depths of ourselves and the God who loves us.' Christmas is not merely the recollection of the event that took place 2000 years ago. It is actually about the reality of the power of God taking on the frailty of a tiny baby. The mystery of the Holy Night must be lived as a spiritual event. The Word who found a dwelling in Mary's womb comes to knock on the heart of every person this Christmas.

The feast of St Nicholas comes at the beginning of Advent and the beginning of the shopping season. St Nicholas says, 'Keep it simple!' 'Keep it simple enough to fit in a shoe or a stocking.' Perhaps our gift cards this year might read: 'The gift I give to you is half an hour of quality conversation each night right after the dishes are done.' Or, 'The gift I give to you is one Saturday a month to be with you and do whatever you want to do.' The festive season is a time of celebration, but for many Australians the festivities also mean extra pressures, like buying gifts and attending many social gatherings. Holiday periods have been associated with higher levels of depression, and one study found that suicide rates increased on the days following holidays. Another reported a 40% increase in suicides in the days following Christmas.

Christmas is about opening our hearts generously, facing our fears and starting all over again. When things are at their worst, someone up there holds us with love in the palm of His hand, giving us comfort no words can even describe. Christmas is about giving and sharing our blessings. It is about thanking people for the smile they brought into our life. It is about love, forgiveness and second chances. It is about renewing our hopes, dreams and faith. The simplicity of the birth of Jesus has given Christians pause to realise that God chose to communicate the great mystery of His love and mercy by sending us the least threatening divine presence we can imagine — a small child totally dependent on His parents.

Christmas reminds us that power is borne of weakness and strength of humility, and that the meek ultimately can inherit the earth. So, in the midst of all our Christmas preparations, can we take time to realise who is born on Christmas Day? Can we reflect that Christmas is a time when God in His humility shows us, if not who we are, at least what we can strive to be? The incarnation of Jesus is a grace we get to experience over and over. Here is the hope that we need to be able to overcome the many challenges life throws at us. That hope is ours in Christ. Jesus comes into our world with every prayer we breathe. The celebrations do end, and the decorations get put away, but the life of the party remains.

May the light of Jesus shine within us and illuminate the lives of those around us. May we experience the goodness of God's grace reborn in every kind work and every helping hand, not just today, but every day. May the light, the hope and the joy of Christmas remain with us always. In that spirit, we can extend ourselves in yearlong gift-giving, not offering immense gifts, but in providing little things that, one by one, make our neighbour's lives holier, healthier and happier.