

*"Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."* Luke 21:36

Today we begin again a new Church Year, that round of festivals and solemnities which take us again over the life and teaching of our blessed Lord and Saviour - this year with most of the emphasis coming from St. Luke's Gospel.

In the passage immediately preceding today's extract for the Gospel Reading, St. Luke recorded Jesus' warning about a coming time of disaster and distress. "Nation will rise against nation; kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and pestilences." The faithful will be persecuted, and taken for trial before kings and governors. But Jesus also said: "Although some will say 'The time is at hand' (meaning the Day of Judgement) "Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified: for this must first take place, but the end will not be at once." (21:8,9) Then Luke records Jesus going into one of those apocalyptic passages where it is hard to determine whether He is speaking of the immediate disaster or of any particular time in history, such as our own, or of the ultimate Day of the Lord: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." (v.27)

Meanwhile, because of the uncertainty of just when that great Coming will be, the Christian community is to be in readiness. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" - that is the keynote of the Advent Season.

Most of us have some sentimental memories of our early Church life - the church where we unwillingly went with our parents to be bored stiff; the Sunday School we endured because of the annual Picnic and the Christmas Party; our Confirmation; our marriage; the funeral services for loved ones. These memories can be quite strong and reassuring. But they have very little value in terms of the on-going, developing life of a Christian. We must not go back into a sentimental past

There are also sentimental dreams of the future which we hope will develop our characters - similarly helpful but similarly distracting. We tend to make plans and dream about what we will do when ..... When we are recognised for our proper worth; when we win the lottery; when our ship comes in. What we will make of our lives; the important positions we will hold; the money we will make; the help we will give to those less fortunate; the good things we will do. One day. But for many of us we have to come to terms with the fact that we will never achieve many of these things. We can be glad if we achieve a selection of them! Nevertheless it is important to have ambitions and aspirations and dreams. But they must never distract us from the needs and service of the present.

Too often when people plan and work for the future they do not devote sufficient thought and energy for the necessary things of the present. So we see young newlyweds saddled with three mortgages and both having to go out to work to service them because they want to create a luxurious future. Too

often the immediate result is pressure on the marriage; latchkey and day-care children; unsupervised adolescents. It happens too with would-be church people. "When we are established," they say. "When we have more time - then we will be along."

These four Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas, direct our thoughts both to the past and to the future. We are reminded of John the Baptist's preparatory work in paving the way for our Lord's work and ministry; how he proclaimed the need for repentance and renewal. They also prepare our minds for the much-loved Christmas story of the Birth of Christ.

Of what value to us are those memories of what John the Baptist taught? Or even the memories of what took place at Bethlehem? Unless we can link them with the present time and with our own lives, the answer is "Very little". So much of the Christmastide celebration is wrapped up in sentimental expression and maudlin religiosity that there is not much of value from a religious standpoint.

The Church's teaching which is put before us at this time should serve to recall us to a sincere repentance, and to a deepening of our worship and service., and to a greater love for our Lord and Saviour, here and now.

These Sundays also direct our minds to the future. We are reminded that as well as His initial coming into the world, Christ comes to us again and again as we open ourselves to Him. Further, as we heard in the Gospel extract, we have the expectation that in due course He will come again with power and great glory. What the nature of that coming will be, we have only the vaguest notion. Nor do we know how near or how far away it is. But its purpose is made perfectly plain - Christ will come to be our Judge. He will come to see what we have each made of the life which God has given us.

This second part of the Advent message, like the first part, directs our thoughts one way and our actions another. Although it tells us of a great event to happen sometime in the future, it does so in order that we may prepare ourselves for it, and the only time we have to do that in, is in the present, here and now.

Christianity is a religion whose roots are in the historic past: in the birth of Christ; in His life and teaching; in His death on the Cross; in His Resurrection. It is also a religion with a great message about the future. More than any of the great religions of the world, it stresses life after death, and one of the great Christian virtues is hope. But we will have missed what Christianity teaches if we do not understand that for practical purposes it is a religion concerned with the present, and with what we are doing day by day. Sentimental memories of the Bible stories we learnt as children, and of the place where we learnt them, and the people from whom we learnt them, is not practical religion. Nor are great plans for the future in this life and anticipation of a new and better life beyond the grave, practical religion either. These things must do more - they must lead us to shape our present life according to the pattern set by Jesus in the past, in preparation for His judgement on it in the future.

*"Take heed to yourselves ... watch at all times."*

**AMEN**

*"John (the Baptist) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.~+ (Luke 3:3)*

In the Gospels, Christmas is not introduced by holly and ivy and snow and jingle bells, as our foolish tradition persists. Nor is it introduced by parties and holidays and excessive eating and drinking. There is nothing of that sugary sentimentality about it. The stark and dramatic figure of John the Baptist strides onto centre stage in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and so on. In the year 27 AD.

John's call is blunt and forthright, calling for a change of heart which will lead to a change of life. He has not time for so-called religious experiences. That change of life will be symbolised by a willingness to accept a baptism like any Gentile outsider seeking to join the Israelites. John in other words, demanded a completely new start, and the public confession of sins before baptism was an admission of the need for the new start.

The two ends of the Jewish spectrum - Pharisees and Sadducees; fundamentalists and liberals - come alike under John's lash. Both groups had lost the vision of what being Children of Israel, God's Chosen People, meant. Just because they were descendants of Abraham was no guarantee of God's favour. John insisted that both groups had to fear and to flee from the coming day of God's anger. No man could claim religious pedigree or privilege - God has no "most favoured nation". Indeed being one of God's children brought with it greater responsibility - concern for others, fair dealing, and so on.

But what has all this to do with Christmas? It is because while John's message goes no further than any of the Old Testament prophets, he is nevertheless greater than any of them for he looks ahead to the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and so make possible that which was impossible even for John

The emergence of John was like the sudden sounding of the voice of God. At this time thoughtful Jews were sadly conscious that for some 400 years there had been no prophet to stir up the consciences of the people and to recall them to God's standards.

So then, what were the characteristics of John and his message?

Well, firstly he fearlessly denounced evil wherever he came across it. Because Herod - a minor king subject to the rule of Rome - had sinned seriously by contracting an evil and unlawful marriage, John unhesitatingly rebuked him. If the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the leaders of orthodox religion, the churchmen of the day, were sunk in ritualistic formalism, John never hesitated to say so. If the ordinary people were living their lives ignoring God, John would tell them so. Wherever John saw evil - in the State, in the Church, in society - he fearlessly rebuked it. He was like a light lighting up dark places; a wind which swept from God throughout the country.

There is still a place in the Christian message for warning and denunciation. This is why Church leaders today are speaking up, particularly with respect to discrimination, treatment of the elderly in nursing homes, social responsibilities. And as in John's day, politicians do not appreciate criticism, and strong words are said. It may be that there have been times when the Church was too careful not to offend. But at times smooth politeness has to be set aside, and blunt rebuke becomes

necessary. Our outspoken Church leaders are not likely to be executed in prison, as was John. But they do have to suffer rudeness, and ugly graffiti . appeared even on the walls of our Church Office since the Church has entered the discrimination debate.

Secondly, John urgently summoned people to righteousness. His message was not a mere negative criticism and denunciation: it was a positive reminder of the moral standards of God. He not only denounced men for what they had done, he summoned them to what they ought to do. He not only condemned men for what they were, he challenged them to what they could be. He not only rebuked evil, he also set before men the good. It may well be that there have been times when the Church was too occupied in telling people what not to do, and too little occupied in setting before them the height of the Christian ideal.

And thirdly, John came from God. He came, not with some opinion of his own, but only after years of lonely meditation and preparation in the wilderness of Judea. He pointed beyond himself. He was not only a light to expose evil and a voice to rebuke sin, but he was also a sign-post to God. It was not himself he wished others to look at: he wished to prepare them for the One who was to come.

It was the Jewish belief that the great prophet Elijah would return before the Messiah came, and that he would be the herald of the coming King. In the Book Malachi we have the promise: "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." (4:5) And then John appeared, wearing a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt around his waist - the very clothing worn by Elijah as described in the Second Book of Kings. (1:8) A second Elijah indeed!

Each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their Gospels connect John with a prophecy from Isaiah (40:3): "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

The few decent, surfaced and artificially-made roads in those days were known as the Kings Highway. Other roads were virtually tracks, worn by the traffic - carts, oxen, mules - on the hard earth. The Kings Highway was kept in repair only as the king needed it for any journey he might make. Before he was due to visit an area, the people were required to get the king's road in order, ready for him to travel on. This is the situation drawn on by both Isaiah's and also John's striking metaphor and call:

*"Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."(Luke 3:5,6)*

What has John's fiery social preaching got to do with Christmas? Very little, if we are thinking only of a sentimental manger scene at Bethlehem, with gentle animals, shepherds, angels, tinsel and glitter. However John's fiery message is most appropriate if we think of Christ's own teaching, and of His own denunciation and warning of judgement. For we believe not only in One who came in humility and lowliness, but also One "who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead - whose kingdom will have no end."

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already. (John 3:16-18)

Rejoice we must, and do, at Christmastide. But it is only those who gladly welcome the first Coming of Christ who have no need to fear His second Coming. For us, it is the culmination of all our hopes and prayers, For an unrepentant world, it is judgement.

That is why Christmastide is for us a solemn as well as a joyous Season. '

**AMEN**

*"The crowds asked him (ie. John the Baptist), "What then should we do?" (Luke 3:10)*

Only twice in the 3-year Cycle of Readings do we hear a passage read from the Book of the Prophet Zephaniah [Zef-an-i-ah] Mind you, it only has three chapters in it! And by and large his predictions are pretty gloomy. The other reading incidentally, is an alternative suggestion on a Sunday in November, Year A. Today's Reading is one of the brighter parts: it is a song inviting God's people to rejoice because their salvation is near. "Sing aloud ..... Rejoice and exult ..... The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst ..... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love." (3:14,17)

But generally Zephaniah's message is "The day of the Lord is darkness and gloom, a day of ruin and devastation." (1:15) This is not at all surprising when you learn of the situation existing in his time. He lived around about 630BC., when the worship of the one true God, Yahweh, was combined with that of some rather nasty cults of Ba-al and Moloch, and Assyrian sun, moon, and astral worship, imposed by the Assyrian overlords of that period.

Zephaniah, influenced by earlier prophets like Isaiah, became gravely concerned about his people. Under the pressure of awful forebodings of the wrath of the righteous God of Israel, the Almighty Creator of the world of nature and of history, he became conscious of the call to go out as God's spokesman to warn the people of God's impending and fearful punishment about to be unleashed upon them, because of their unfaithfulness and disobedience.

The immediate occasion for concern seems to have been the advance of a warlike people, the Scythians, who were sweeping over western Asia. Zephaniah saw them as the agents of God - agents of destruction used by God to bring about the dreaded Day of the Lord. Zephaniah, like all the prophets, puts words into God's mouth: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away man and beast; the birds of the air and the fish of the sea; I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, says the Lord." (1:2,3) This terrifying Day of the Lord would not be only for Israel, but for all mankind, and indeed the whole creation. The only hope of averting the calamity was for the people to repent, before it was too late.

"I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel." (3:12)

In the midst of all the terror and destruction, God will save an obedient, faithful, humble remnant. This is the theme, the golden thread which runs throughout Holy Scripture, Old and New Testaments: the ungodly bring about their own destruction; the faithful receive salvation and eternal life.

And of course, we see ourselves as being counted among the faithful! We certainly do not see ourselves as the ungodly - isn't our presence here this morning proof that we are among the faithful? If we do have a little niggle at the back of our mind that perhaps we do have the odd fault or two - we are comfortable in the knowledge that God will forgive us. "God wills all men to be saved, for God is love", the Baptism Service in the Book of Common Prayer says. What we so easily overlook in our self-satisfaction is that although as St. Peter wrote: "Christ died for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18), and although God wills all mankind to be saved - the onus is still on us as individuals. We have to reach out and accept what is offered, what has

been done. To be righteous and not self-righteous; humble, loving and meek. To be aware of our sinful condition, and turn, and repent.

Zephaniah's remnant would be poor in terms of wealth and status, but rich in faith and truth. Their joy and their glory would be in the Lord's presence among them, His people. "He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival." (3:17)

Zephaniah's moral vigor and religious passion; his relentless insistence on social righteousness and sincere religion; his emphasis on God's righteousness, all make his message full of significance for any age, but especially when there is the need to learn again the basic truths of moral religion - the holy fear of God. And surely we must class our own time under that heading.

Zephaniah's prediction of the continuance of the saved remnant as a God-centred community was fulfilled after the captivity and exile of the People of Israel in Babylon, some 50 or 60 years later. His ideal of the humble and meek inheriting the Kingdom of God was taken up many years after by Jesus: "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matt.18:3) And in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." (Matt.5:3,5)

Echoing the joyful expectation of that passage from Zephaniah, is the extract from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, read as the Second Lesson: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near." (4:4,5).

Over and over again the press, radio and television remind us that this is the Festive Season. But what are people celebrating? A time of goodwill, parties, present giving? The end of the calendar year? Is that all there is? Christians celebrate the Incarnation of the Saviour, the One who saves. And "God wills all men to be saved, for God is love."

The birth of a little baby, more than 2000 years ago, is cute and sentimental and not at all threatening. The real meaning of the Incarnation lies in the Person of that Child, and who He turned out to be, and what He achieved: the salvation of all mankind - or rather, of those who would turn to Him - and live! '

We heard in the Gospel the reaction of those who took note of the proclamation of John the Baptist concerning the commencement of the ministry of that Child: "What then should we do?" John answered with practical advice: give up the old selfish, self-centred ways. This is what repentance means - a turning away from the old and turning to the new way of life, a Christ-centred way of life. When Peter some years later, was preaching on the Day of Pentecost, and convinced his hearers that Jesus whom they had seen crucified, was in fact the Messiah, and that He had conquered evil and sin and death, and was exalted in heaven, their question and Peter's reply were the same: "Brethren, what shall we do?" - "Repent."

We are such frail creatures, so prone to error, to faulty decision, to shortsightedness, to such vanity and self-centredness, that we should have constantly before us the need for repentance and amendment of life. Repentance involves regret for what the situation was from which one is turning - the expression of that regret is termed confession. The assurance of God's forgiveness of the fault or sin or way of life is termed

absolution. Conditional on absolution is the endeavour to correct the damage done, and the intention of amendment of one's faulty way of life - by the grace of God.

Advent is surely a time of mixed feelings. A building-up of joyful excitement as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation of the Saviour. And some feeling of apprehension as we read and hear and think about the warnings of His Second Coming, in glory, to judge the living and the dead, bringing in His Kingdom which will have no end. The Day of the Lord expected with such fear by the prophets of old.

But to use expressions like First and Second Coming is misleading! The Second Person of the Holy Trinity was in the world from the moment of creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ..... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father", wrote St. John in the introduction to his Gospel.

We know Christ comes into our hearts as we read our Bibles, pray, and open ourselves to His influence. We recognise the Real Presence of Christ with us as we receive the consecrated Bread and Wine of the Holy Communion.

Nevertheless, the Day of the Lord is at hand; the warning is imperative; we must be prepared for it. "Watch, for you know not the time." Zephaniah, 2,600 years ago, saw its proximity then. John the Baptist expected it in his day: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:17) Then comes that curious statement: "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Good news for those who heard and repented; bad news for those who continued unrepentant, unloving, and self-centred.

"And we, what should we do?" "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. .... And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."  
(Phi1.4:4)                      **AMEN**

*"Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (Luke 1:42)*

Since there are only two accounts of the Annunciation in the Gospels - St. Matthew's for Year A, the announcement to Joseph, and St. Luke's for Year B, to Mary - on this Sunday before Christmas in Year C we have instead the account of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth.

The importance of the passage, and its use on the Sunday before Christmas, comes from the recognition by Elizabeth of the blessedness of Mary. Three times in this passage the word "Blessed" is used, and a few verses on in this chapter, the word occurs again in the Song of Mary, the Magnificat - 4 times in six verses. This is the scriptural ground for calling Mary the "Blessed Virgin".

Two closely connected reasons are given for Elizabeth's calling her this. Firstly, because of Mary's faith: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Her faith, which led to her obedience. And secondly because of the child Mary carried "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Mary is blessed, not for what she was or is in herself, but only in relation to the Incarnation. Mary's importance to the Christian religion depends upon her faith and obedience as the preconditions which made the Incarnation humanly possible, and upon the fact that she bore the Christ Child.

The greatest event in the history of the world is the coming of Christ, the Incarnation, the taking of our human flesh and nature by the eternal Son of God: all that we mean when we say in the Creed: "and became truly human". This is the central point of history, and one which gives history meaning. In it is revealed not only the purpose of God, the meaning of life, but the nature and character of God Himself.

Greek mythology, and that of other ancient countries too, has many stories of the gods taking human form, but -their personalities and their actions are scarcely god-like, and often quite the reverse. Certainly they could not be taken seriously except by the very credulous. The Christian Faith looks back to events which are historical, which really happened. Thus the first Epistle of St. John says: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3)

But how do we know that the Gospels themselves are not legendary? Jesus performed miracles and so proved Himself to be the Son of God. Supposing we do take these as factual, might not some at least be capable of some psychological explanation - especially the healings? There was the Resurrection of course - but some scholars have suggested that what arose from death was the crushed faith of the Apostles. And so it could go on.

That's the trouble with signs and wonders. In the absence of faith they can be explained away. Signs require faith - they do not produce faith. That is why Jesus was so reluctant to use His extraordinary powers. He said as much to the royal official whose son was ill: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." (John 4:48) You can almost hear His exasperation! That is why He did not accept Satan's challenge to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and walk away unhurt. And the reaction to Jesus walking on the water could simply be "How does He do it?" "What's the trick?" Signs and wonders do not necessarily evoke faith.

Mary was one of the faithful and devout among the people who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. To her was given the wonderful and astounding news that she was chosen to be the instrument through which God would become human, chosen to be the mother of the Lord, chosen to play an important role in God's divine purpose. The divine birth was to be miraculous: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (Luke 1:35) But Mary was no passive agent: she actively co-operated with the Divine Will: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (1:38)

Such simple and complete obedience. No wonder we call her blessed. It was a young girl from an upcountry village whom God chose for the working of His divine purpose. He is not concerned with pomp and prestige and might, as the world is. What matters is a heart and a mind and a will freely offered to Him without reservation or holding back. We honour Mary for her faith, her obedience, and her joy in responding to the divine will and in fulfilling it.

Signs and wonders do not often produce faith, so we should not set much store by the miraculous. We should be careful about groups which proclaim that they are the True Church and seek to prove it by advertising miraculous healings and instantly-answered demands made upon God. Rather, for those who do believe, having made the leap of faith in spite of reservations and-uncertainties, signs of God's presence and activity are to be expected and they are encouragements to us on our Christian journey. And these signs do not always have to be what we usually term miraculous. To give a simple example. Worshipping in church on a day of sunshine and cloud, we may become aware of the sun breaking through and lighting up the church just as we hear the pronouncement of the Absolution or the Blessing or at some other significant part of the service. The sun breaking through happens all the time - if we notice it, it's probably because of what else is happening at the time, and we might read it as a sign. It is not a miracle; it might just be a coincidence. But we may be reminded by it of the love of God breaking through into our lives. It is then a most significant sign.

There was something radically wrong with Elizabeth's pregnancy, if her unborn child had not made his presence felt long before the sixth month! Yet when Elizabeth heard Mary's voice greeting her, and the child moved, she read it as a sign of recognition of the blessedness of Mary.

And don't forget that Mary herself was given a sign - to reinforce her faith. "Behold, your kinswoman, Elizabeth, in her old age has also conceived a son." It is not surprising that Mary went to see for herself. This is what signs do; this is what they are for: to confirm the faith we already possess. It is in God's mercy that they are given. It is part of God's gracious acceptance of our frailty - He knows we need reassurance.

In this Christmas Season we again celebrate the Birth of Jesus of Nazareth who some people call the Messiah or the Saviour. Will it be for you simply the anniversary of the birth of a legendary or historical figure? The occasion for sentimentality and self-gratification and over-indulgence? Or will you see in the commemoration the great sign of God's redeeming love for mankind - His frail and fallen creatures who He sent His Son to rescue?

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people."

**Amen**

**CHRISTMAS EVE/DAY, Year C**  
**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

"Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas –  
Star and angels gave the sign."

The first verse of Hymn 243 in "The Australian Hymn Book", written by Christina Rossetti

Do you look at the "Peanuts" comic strip in the "Advertiser"? It is usually not only humorous, but quite thoughtful, and if we pause, even thought provoking. The creator of "Peanuts", Charles M. Schultz, was quite a religious man. Some years back he made a video film called "Charley Brown's Christmas". In one segment Charley Brown is quite fed up with the commercialism and irreligious celebration, and wonders if that was all there was to Christmas. His friend Linus - the little chap who cannot bear to be separated from his security blanket - says: "This is what Christmas is all about Charley Brown: There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore angel said unto them: Fear not, for behold, I bring of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto a Saviour, which is Christ the ye shall find the babe wrapped And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Linus concluded: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charley Brown."

The reality of Christmas so often fails to get through to us because we have made it pretty-pretty, wrapped it up in decorative paper, celebrated it by eating and drinking too much, trying to express our love for our families and friends by buying them expensive and often unwanted gifts.

Not that there is any wrong in having a few drinks with friends, and getting as many of the family together as we can, and singing sentimental touching carols. It is good that families should gather together for a festive occasion. These days, it is not all that easy as families grow up and disperse.

In the churches, a greater-than-usual number gather to celebrate the Birth of the Saviour. There is a cartoon, not by Charles Schultz, which shows two people in a crowded church, and one says out of the corner of his mouth: "Anytime now we'll get a commercial about Church being on every Sunday!" Well, this is it! How big will the congregation be next Sunday, and the Sunday after, and the Sundays after that? What will Christmas mean to us next week, and when we've tidied up the mess, and taken the empties to the recycle place, and put away the tinsel; and folded up the plastic tree, and paid off the credit card? We go back to the real world and we find it unchanged. Back to "the trivial round, the common task", where there's not much excitement or even much challenge. That's real life.

The first Christmas wasn't too crash hot for the participants! For sure the shepherds had some excitement - they were scared stiff at the heavenly vision, and who wouldn't be? Poor old Joseph must have been worried sick about not being able to provide his wife with decent accommodation. It couldn't

have been any fun for her either, having to give birth in a dimly-lit, smelly, unhygienic stable. The wise men had to travel for days - we don't know for how many - following what might have turned out to be a false belief. Within a few days, perhaps a couple of weeks, Joseph had to pack up Mary and the Infant and sneak quietly out of the country, while behind them Herod's soldiers went through the town killing every new-born male child in the hope of exterminating this one. There was no feasting and joy for many mothers in Bethlehem that year.

The Holy Family had peace for some 30 years, but Mary must often have had some worried memories as she remembered the words of Simeon at the time of her purification: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against - and a sword will pierce through your own soul also." (Luke 2:33)

Then the time came for Jesus to leave home and begin His ministry. Those who could not, or would not accept Him as Messiah hounded Him, trying to trip Him up in His teaching, trying to make Him condemn Himself with some blasphemous statement. And eventually they won, in earthly terms, and had Him executed on a trumped-up accusation.

Does this spoil the sweet Christmas theme for you? Or take away something of the lightheartedness and gaiety? I hope not, for the real and lasting joy of Christmas lies in a proper recognition of what Christmas was before we turned it into superficial festivity. Only as we come to that proper recognition will we find the lasting, deep-down joy of the Incarnation - the taking-on of our humanity, with all its weaknesses and fallibility, by the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Only then can we find strong comfort, secure refuge, a firm foundation on which to build our lives, strength to cope in our times of trouble and anguish.

Will partying, tinsel, expensive presents, plastic Christmas trees, provide that? No way! Nor will you find it if you come to pay your respects to God only at Christmas and Easter and just now and then when the mood and the weather are right.

So what is the message of Christmas? That God came into our world, to where we are. God didn't shout down instructions about living in the world over some heavenly intercom. He came and lived where we worry about crop failure, and locust plagues, and earthquakes which level towns and kill thousands, and famines, and plane crashes, and murders, and the proliferation of destructive drug useage. Where we try to do what is right and good and honorable - but fail so often that we are almost ashamed to try again. It was that sort of world then too. Christ came here - well not to this town, but to problems similar to those which confront us. He understands how the real world feels. He understands what it is like. He understands you and me.

People often fret: "Why does God, if there is a God, allow all these dreadful things to happen, if He is in charge?" Others in the grind say: "What have I done to deserve this?" And sometimes they say: "God has done it to test us!" Wrong approach. Our God is a God of love, and love does not deliberately cause suffering. God does not cause the suffering we see about us. God does not decide which families shall have handicapped children, or who will suffer some agonizing illness. Rather, He stands ready to help us cope with our tragedies if we will let Him. St. John wrote: "God is love .... the love of God was made manifest among us, in that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him." (1 John 4:7,9)

Look at the real Christmas - the grotty stable, the fear of the shepherds, the awe of the Magi, the flight of the Holy Family from the slaughter of the innocents. The coming into our world of One who knows all about suffering and abuse and rejection - and who overcame it all. And not only overcame it for Himself, but came to give us the power to cope.

That is the reality of Christmas, which stays with us after the trappings are tidied up. Christmas has a message for the real world:

*"He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."*

That is what Christmas is all about. May it be truly happy and holy for you.

**AMEN**

"Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour."

(Luke 2:51)

The Gospels are almost silent about the early years of our Lord's life. St. Matthew tells us that after the visit of the Wise Men, and to escape the sword of Herod, Joseph, being warned in a dream by an angel, took Mary and the young Child Jesus to Egypt and safety, not returning until Herod was dead. The Holy Family then returned to Nazareth, where Joseph re-opened the carpenter's shop he had left when the decree of Caesar Augustus required him to go to Bethlehem with Mary for the census. The Holy Family disappears from the pages of history, emerging temporarily in the incident recounted in today's Gospel passage, and vanishing again for some 18 years, when Jesus began His ministry at the age of 30.

You might have read, or heard of some of the many legends told covering the unknown period of Jesus' life. They are reputed to fill in details not covered by the Gospels. There is in fact a whole body of writings which were written at about the same time the Gospels were. Twenty of them were collected first in an official list, recognised in practically all parts of the Church by the end of the second century. Later additions came slowly - there are seven of these, to make up the 27 Books of the New Testament. They were added after a long process of discussion and balancing of claims. The Church read as Holy Scripture - and we are talking now only of New Testament Scripture - those writings which it felt to be most vitally related to the spiritual impulse that created them. The Old Testament list was already set and taken over from Judaism. The official list, or Canon, was compiled of writings which had already made good their authority and were widely accepted. They were of course individual documents, copied and circulated. They were not compiled into one volume until much later in history, with the advent of the printing press. Those Books which were accepted to be part of the official Canon were outstanding in their truthful reporting and in the teaching contained by them.

How do we know that we can rely on those Books which we have inherited as our New Testament, then, if there were so many from which to choose? It would be rather like finding a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and trying to fit it into one it didn't belong to. The rejected writings just do not fit in or harmonize with what we know of Christ and His teaching from other, accepted Scriptures. The answer is that these books were written while the memory of the Church could accept them or reject them. In offering proof of his own veracity, St. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Jesus was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brethren at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep." (1 Cor.15:6) Just as if a biographer of say Winston Churchill included an erroneous account of some incident, someone is still about who could give the lie to it. And the Church in the time of the writing of the Gospels would have been extremely careful about what was recorded of the life and teaching of the Son of God.

So the only reliable incident we have about the childhood and youth of Jesus is that in the Gospel appointed for today. We have no photograph, painting, or pencil sketch of Jesus - nothing to allow us to say: "Look at the character in that face. Isn't it obvious he was far and away ahead of anyone else of his age!" No pictorial evidence exists. Nor can we look at His writings and discuss the form and content and

development of thought.' We have no written work, no music He might have composed, no painting He might have executed. In fact we have no tangible, documentary evidence, nothing near proof that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man." There is only St. Luke's account to go on.

Luke however, is not a writer to be lightly passed over. He was a careful historian. In writing the Book of the Acts of the Apostles for example, he did not slip up over the diverse titles given to the various officials in the Roman administration, complicated as they were. Luke was careful, orderly, and thorough in his work. So we cannot pass lightly over the account of Jesus' boyhood which he has given us. Brief though it is, it is a wonderful summary.

The Child was brought into touch with the established religion of the day from the beginning. On the eighth day of His life, He was circumcised and named. A few weeks later Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord, as required by the Law of Moses, and the sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons was made. (Luke 2:21-24) Judaism as a religion was established and it was organized; it was also far from perfect. But Jesus was not allowed to grow up in isolation from the visible organisation of religious practice. At the age of 12, Jesus, a Jewish boy, became "*bar-mitzvah*" - a son of the Law, accepting for Himself the responsibilities and obligations to which Joseph and Mary had committed Him at His circumcision - not unlike our Confirmation following Baptism.

Perfect though He was, Jesus was not free from subjection to the authority of His parents. The path to perfection does not lie through complete freedom: too much freedom is licence and leads to imperfection. That is not a very popular understanding these days but it is true nevertheless.

Jesus did however, break away from His parents' apron-strings, and the process began with the incident in the Temple at the age of 12. It was painful - the growing independence of a developing child always does hurt good parents. And you can hear the hurt even through Luke's reporting: "Child, why have you treated us like this?" But there cannot be full development of personality without the breakaway.

This all means of course, that Jesus developed in childhood, in adolescence, and in adulthood as we do. He did not begin with a man's mind in a child's body. He could not have been aware in the early stages of His life that He was the Son of God, God Incarnate! That is unreasonable to imagine. He developed gradually - only in His case He was perfect at each stage of development. Because He developed throughout in constant response to the will of the Father, without rebellion, His insight into life was quite astonishing - to us!

All very interesting perhaps, but what difference does this make to us? How will today's Gospel help us, particularly as we near the start of a new year?

Well, Jesus reached the point of tremendous insight into life through co-operation with the will of God for Him. We however are so often tempted to think that such a life of faith and obedience makes a person soft, square, wet, green, uncool! We tend to think that a person must have "got around a bit" to be fully mature. But an eye specialist does not have to suffer affliction in his own eyes to be a good eye doctor. Isn't it better that he has perfect eyes before he looks at ours?

Jesus achieved His wisdom and stature and favour with God and man because He never compromised the right. Too often we church-people lose our nerve about worshipping, believing,

obeying and talking about our religious way of life. It doesn't make for weakness at all - rather it makes for real strength of personality and wisdom and courage in the face of a world constantly taking the easy way out.

The knowledge of the growth of Jesus in the real things of life ought to encourage us in the rightness and the wisdom of following His example and of constantly seeking His grace with which to do it.

**AMEN**