

The Centurion

The Parish Magazine of St. Alban's Church

1011 Old Joppa Road, Joppa, Maryland, 21085



My dear People:

We have now officially entered the so-called holiday season! As I write this it is one week before Thanksgiving, and they are already playing holiday music 24/7 on WLIF. I would be remiss if I did not remind us that Advent is a season of quiet expectation where we look forward to the coming of the Lord. It has penitential overtones to it. We should use this time - the month of December - to spiritually prepare ourselves for our Christmas communions in some meaningful way. Use your imagination! You can set up an Advent wreath at home (supplies may be purchased from a store like *Michael's*) and say special Advent prayers (usually the Collects for each Sunday) with your family before dinner. You can listen to certain CDs of good spiritual music, and keep them playing in the background in the evening. Spiritual reading is also very useful. The daily Scripture readings appointed for Morning and Evening Prayer during Advent are an excellent place to start (BCP pp. x-xi), as is some other devotional text. Coming to Evening Prayer and class on Tuesday nights is an option as well. So there is lots we can do. But whatever spiritual exercise we do we should at least strive to do *something* to bring to our hearts and minds the spiritual import of this season and to draw us closer to God in preparation for Christmas. If we complain, as we are apt to do, at how secularized and materialistic Advent and Christmas have become, then we should look at ourselves, and examine our own lives to see what *we* have done to contribute to this sad state of affairs. How has our spiritual apathy contributed to the godless secularism that is taking over the world? *The reason that secularism has made such headway, and that the world is in a moral and spiritual mess is because secularists are by and large much more passionate about what they believe than Christians!* Whenever we let pleasure, entertainment, shopping, and the like come between us and the regular practice of our faith, and whenever we separate ourselves from the the Lord and giver of life by making small, seemingly insignificant spiritual compromises, then Satan has won a battle in the war between good and evil. And in the end not only we, but the whole world, to which we are to be salt and light, are the ones who end up losing. So this Advent and Christmas let us be very deliberate and intentional as to how we practice our faith. In addition to going to celebrations and gatherings, watching sports, and shopping, *let us find something spiritual to do each day as Christmas approaches so as to be ready for the coming of our Lord!*

Affectionately, your Friend and Pastor, *J. Gordon Anderson*

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UPCOMING HOLY DAYS:

December 19th - Ember Day

Holy Communion @ 10:00 a.m.

December 20th - St. Thomas (eve)

Holy Communion @ 3:00 p.m.

December 24th - Christmas Eve Services

Holy Communion @ 6:30 p.m.

Holy Communion @ 8:30 p.m.

December 25th - Christmas Day Service

Holy Communion @ 10:00 a.m.

December 26th - St. Stephen

Holy Communion @ 10:00 a.m.

December 27th - St. John

Holy Communion @ 10:00 a.m.

December 28th - Holy Innocents

Holy Communion @ 10:00 a.m.

Prayer Book Holy Day Masses last a little over half an hour and always include Morning Prayer! Please make time to come out for these important days as you are able!

THE CHRISTIAN YEAR: *Is it God's will that the Church should follow an official ecclesiastical calendar?*

December means that it is Advent season, and Advent is always the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. After the four Sundays in Advent, we go into Christmastide, then Epiphany, followed by pre-Lent, and Lent, and so on. Hymn 235 in the *Hymnal 1940* is a beautiful poem about the Christian year and what each season represents. As Anglicans we take for granted that there is a Christian Year.

We might be surprised to learn, however, that some more extreme Protestant churches and churchmen not only don't observe a church year, they radically oppose the very idea of having one! People of this persuasion often point to the gross commercialism and secularism surrounding Christmas and Easter and use that as proof that *devout* Christians should have nothing to do with these "holy" days, much less with any season that encompasses them!

Others have a more theological critique of holy days and seasons. They point out that nowhere in the Bible is it commanded to observe Christmas, Easter, and similar days. The only holy day, they say, is the sabbath day, which is either Saturday or Sunday depending on who you are talking to. The Puritan party in England back in the 16th-17th century held this view. But is this theological critique of holy days and seasons valid? If we examine the evidence we have to say no.

First, it is quite obvious that the Bible affirms the observation

of specific holy days throughout the year. A number of the them were enshrined in the Law of Moses for the Old Testament Church. These include such days as: the *Sabbath* (the day of rest); the *Day of Atonement*; *Pentecost* (giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai); the feast of *Tabernacles* (commemorating the wandering in the wilderness), and the *Passover* (commemorating the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt).

Second, it is obvious that additional holy days were established by the authority of the Jewish Church. Some of the more popular of these are: *Purim* (commemorating the deliverance of the Jews by Queen Esther); and the *Dedication/Feast of Lights* (better known as *Hanukkah*, which celebrated the cleansing of the Temple). There is no command from God to celebrate these days, yet they still became part of the Jewish liturgical tradition.

What we see from this brief sketch of the major holy days of the Old Testament dispensation is two-fold: God commanded certain day to be observed as special holy days, and He also, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, ordained that His people should establish other important holy days that commemorated His marvelous acts in their history and lives. The implications of this for us should be clear. There is nothing wrong with establishing and celebrating holy days, and setting aside certain times and seasons of the year to commemorate specific events. And the Church, the people of

God, has the authority to establish devotional and liturgical practices for the life of her people. Article XX of the *Articles of Religion* is very clear on this. (see BCP p. 607)

Thus, the New Testament people of God were lead by the Holy Spirit to gradually replace the feasts and fasts of the old pre-Christian dispensation with new ones that commemorated what the old days had only anticipated (Easter, for example, superseded the Passover). They were also moved to establish new days to commemorate entirely new events, such as Christmas, which celebrated the nativity of our Lord. The sabbath day was moved from Saturday to Sunday in order to better reflect the resurrection of our Lord. All of this was done under the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who gave her the authority to make these changes.

So as Anglicans - catholic Christians who hold to apostolic faith and practice - we find that it is "meet and right" to observe an ecclesiastical year that is punctuated by various holy days and anchored down by the two greatest days, Christmas and Easter. Since we believe that the Holy Spirit indwells the Church (BCP p. 291) we believe that He has guided her to establish these days in order to remember and make present to us the important events of the life of Christ, and the unfolding of the mystery of our salvation in Him. ✠

SACRED SCRIPTURE: *The Second Sunday in Advent is "Bible Sunday."*

The second Sunday in Advent is nicknamed "Bible Sunday." This is because of the Collect for the day which reads: "*BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.*" (BCP, p. 92)

As Christians we have to make the regular study of Scripture part of our lives. A Christian who does not read and study the Bible on a regular basis is like a football player who does not study a playbook during the week before the game; a politician who hardly ever reads newspapers; or an accountant who does not keep up with tax laws! If we do not regularly study the Bible we are falling down on our spiritual duty. To be a Christian is to believe in God, and to be a disciple and follower of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The sacred Scriptures are the primary place where we learn about God and Jesus. They are called the "word of God," because God the Holy Spirit inspired men and women to write them as a testimony of His divine revelation of Himself. If we do not study the Scriptures on a regular basis then we will remain babes in the faith, and never develop a deep, abiding relationship with God, because we won't know anything about Him! It is impossible to build a relationship with someone if we know nothing about him.

Indeed one of the hallmarks of the Anglican tradition, and of the Reformation in general, is that Christians should read and study the Scriptures. The medieval Church got into all sorts of troubles, and developed a number of heretical beliefs and practices precisely because so many people - including clergy - were ignorant of the Scriptures. This is still a danger today. People fall prey to different teachings because they do not know the Bible. Others invent false doctrines and successfully pass them off as gospel truth because so many people - even in our very literate and "Christian" society - still do not know and read the Bible on their own!

So it is clear that Christians should make the regular study of the Bible part of their spiritual lives. That many do not is lamentable. Many do not simply

because they are "cultural" Christians. They grew up in a church, attending on a semi-regular, or even regular basis, but they never really had a conversion in their hearts, and the faith was never an integral part of their home, so they eventually drifted away from God and the Church to live lives indistinguishable from that of a pagan. But in my experience a sizable minority of Christians who do love God and try to follow His commands and walk in His ways, but who not study the Bible regularly, do so for just a few reasons:

1) They are lacking in discipline. Discipline is a key aspect of life, and of the spiritual life. Many do not set aside time each day or each week to study the Bible. As we know, lack of discipline is a hallmark of our society. We develop health and financial problems because of a lack of discipline. Lack of discipline hurts us spiritually as well. *What we need to do is set aside time each week - preferably each day - to study the Bible!* Spending as little as 5-10 minutes each day reading a passage from the Bible and then praying will have a huge effect on us spiritually. **2) They do not know how to study the Bible.** It is important that we not let the Bible intimidate us. The best way to get familiar with it is to just sit down and read it. It is conveniently divided into books, chapters, and verses, so all we have to do is pick a book, and read it little by little, chapter by chapter. *Note that it is best to start with a book that you are broadly familiar with, such as one of the Gospels, instead of starting with an obscure Old Testament minor prophet, such as Nabum!* Beyond this, you may purchase commentaries or "study" Bibles (Bibles with notes) that aid in understanding the meaning of various passages. **3) They have a Bible they do not like to read.** This is very common. You have a Bible, but it is beat-up, the print is too small, and the language is too hard to understand. The solution? *Buy a new Bible from Barnes and Noble!* Get one in a translation that you can understand that is comfortable to read and hold. It is like jogging: if you don't jog because your shoes have holes in them, *buy a new pair of shoes, then you'll be motivated to go and run!*

So this year make a commitment to study the Bible regularly. It is our Christian duty so to do. If you need help be ye sure that the rector is always happy to assist and provide suggestions as you study God's most holy and excellent word! ☩

SPIRITUALITY: *“Union with Him” by Thomas Merton (excerpted from his book “New Seeds of Contemplation”)*

How can I say that I have found him and found myself in Him if I never know Him or think of Him, never take any interest in Him or seek Him or desire His presence in my soul?

What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and all my will to created things, desiring only ends that fall far short of Him?

If my mind does not belong to Him then I do not belong to Him either. If my love does not reach out towards Him but scatters itself in His creation it is because I have reduced His life in me to the level of a formality, forbidding it to move me with a truly vital influence.

Set me free from the laziness that goes about disguised as activity when activity is not required of me, and from the cowardice that does what is not demanded, in order to escape sacrifice.

But give me the strength that waits upon You in silence and peace. Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. ☩

Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968) was a Cistercian monk who resided at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky for most of his life. Loved by people of all traditions, he was a prolific and popular writer on the spiritual life.

PARISH NEWS AND NOTICES: *Please make a note of these important announcements and events!*

Sunday, Dec. 9th - Holy Baptism - At the 10:00 a.m. service we will welcome by baptism into Christ's One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church *Blake Michael Nelson*.

Thursday, Dec. 13th - Intercessory Prayer Group - Join us as we meet on Thursday December 13th at 7 p.m. at the church for a time of sharing and prayer for those in need in our parish community.

Sunday, Dec. 16th - Institution of New Vestrymen and Acolytes - Join us as we formally institute our new vestrymen and acolytes. New vestrymen Rich Burt and Janet Okutoyi will be instituted at the 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. services respectively. New acolytes Chris Reid and Jason Taylor will be instituted at the 10:00 a.m. service.

Sunday, Dec. 16th - Joint service of Choral Evensong: Come on out to Grace Reformed Episcopal Church in Havre de Grace on Sunday, December 16th at 6:00 p.m. as we join with some other Anglican churches in the area to celebrate a service of sung Evening Prayer. It will be followed

by a lovely reception in the parish hall. Join us as we revive this tradition of worship and fellowship.

Sunday, Dec. 23rd - Decorate the Church for Christmas - Don't just rush out of church after the service. Stay, have a snack, and then help us get the tree set up, the poinsettias in place, and all of the other decorations in place for Christmastide!

Sunday, Jan. 6th - Epiphany Luncheon and Gag Gift Exchange - This year Epiphany falls on a Sunday. As is our custom, we will have a covered dish luncheon and our gag gift exchange that day. So be sure to save that special gift that you received but are not quite interested in keeping so someone else may be able to be blessed by it!

Tuesday, Jan. 22nd - Annual Meeting of the Order of St. Vincent - On this date all altar servers and readers need to come to the church for this mandatory meeting. If you serve at the altar in any capacity please set aside this date now and plan on attending. We only have one meeting a year, and your presence at this meeting is essential so we can discuss liturgical business. Tentative time is 6:30 p.m. Dinner will be provided. ☩