

### Advent 3: CCSY, 13 December 2009

Zeph 3:14-20; Song of Isaiah; Phil 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

#### *Avatar*

This morning we have a few angelic visitors: a series of works created by the Parish's *Artsearch* group. With particular thanks to Mother Jenny and Alan Day, and to Ron Austin, we can ponder these messengers who awaken and kindle our sense of expectation: an angel to the shepherds; an angel who anticipates the new Jerusalem; an angel who gazes upon the glory of the Father's only Son; an angel from the heavenly host praising God and singing 'Glory to God and peace on earth'; an angel of the Epiphany; and the Archangel Gabriel, who announces glad tidings to Mary. As you approach the altar today, and after the service, take a closer look at these creatures of the biblical imagination and the artists' vision, and allow them to be bearers of Good News to you.

The Latin word *Gaudete*, traditionally applied to this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, literally means 'Rejoice!', and the colour rose helps to carry something of its liturgical 'mood' for us. Rose is a softening of violet. It is violet approaching white. In this sense, it anticipates Birth of Christ, much as the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent (Refreshment or *Laetare* Sunday) anticipates the light of the Resurrection. It intimates the mystery of the now and the not yet in the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Even our morning tea today has a rosy flavour, including a little something to aid our rejoicing!

This *Gaudete* Sunday falls, of course, during the United Nations Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, and on the first Sunday following the Parliament of World Religions, both having made almost as big a splash here as the release of *Avatar* – a film which, coincidentally, connects with each of these major events.

The movie is set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, on a small moon called *Pandora* – home to the *Navi*: a sentient humanoid race standing three meters tall, with tails and sparkling blue skin, who live in harmony with their unspoiled world. A former Marine wounded in combat on Earth is selected to participate in the *Avatar* program there, which will enable him to walk again, but as humans are unable to breathe the air on *Pandora*, they have created genetically-bred human-*Navi* hybrids, known as Avatars.

From the Sanskrit for 'descent', in Hinduism an avatar signifies the descent of divinity into flesh. Krishna, for example, is the eighth avatar (or incarnation) of Vishnu, for Hindus the Supreme Personality of Godhead. One of the earliest references to avatar is in the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the Hindu Scriptures, where the role of an avatar of Vishnu is described as bringing *dharma*, or righteousness, back to the social and cosmic order. As Krishna explains:

Whenever righteousness is weak and faints, and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth . . . . [F]or . . . salvation . . . for the destruction of evil . . . for the fulfilment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass. [4:7-8]

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<sup>1</sup> Hyacinth Marie Cordell, OP, see [www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1939268/posts](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1939268/posts), cited 12 December, 2009.

John Baptist's words in today's gospel reading are telling on the back of the Parliament of religions: 'God is able [*even*] *from these stones* to raise up children to Abraham.' The Abrahamic heritage in which we stand is not a right: certainly not for us a birth right, as might be claimed for Israel, although John had other ideas. God raises up children for Abraham within and beyond Judaism by God's gracious promise, first incarnated in the miraculous birth of Isaac. And, like Wisdom's children in Luke's gospel, so Abraham's children are vindicated by their works, known by their fruits – fruits worthy, indicative, of the repentance which is that fundamental orientation towards the kingdom of righteousness; a kingdom proclaimed by Krishna and John Baptist, by Mary and Jesus of Nazareth, by the prophets and the angels, by holy men and women of every age, and by people of good will in every culture and tradition.

What fruits worthy of such repentance might God raise up in us this Advent? What challenging exhortations might *we* hear amidst, and as an integral part of, the Good News – Good News that is not addressed to the Church, but to the world?

How might a Parliament of religions, or a Climate Change summit, or even a B-grade Hollywood blockbuster, reflect and inform our response to the collective hubris from which justice is faint and righteousness weak; which has invoked the wrath of the planet, if not of God, and – so some would argue – sees an environmental axe lying at the root of the planetary tree?

It's often said that Christianity is not about doing so much as being; and I'd be the first to agree. But being is always being *for*, as God's being is *for* the world, which means *being* issues in *doing* those things that advance what it is we are *for*.

The Anglican Consultative Council recently offered to the worldwide Communion of Anglican Churches five 'Marks of Mission',<sup>2</sup> namely:

- to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom;
- to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers;
- to respond to human need by loving service;
- to seek to transform unjust structures of society; and,
- to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

And on 16 September last, the Bishops of the Church of England, in a rare statement *not* about sex, declared, "we have a responsibility to protect and assist those vulnerable communities that are already experiencing, through no fault of their own, the devastating impacts of a changing climate."

To which our Primate, with reference to the 2007 General Synod Canon on the Protection of the Environment, has added, "Now more than ever we are called to demonstrate our commitment to strive to achieve the fifth Mark of Mission by *living simply and sustainably*, and by pressing our [politicians] to provide effective leadership both within our nation and in the international arena."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm), cited 12 December 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See Philip Aspinall's *Letter to all Australian Bishops*, 25 September, 2009, emphasis added.

In answer to the question of the soldiers and the tax-collectors in today's gospel, 'What then must we do?', perhaps we haven't come all that far from John Baptist's instructions to live simply – and I wouldn't have picked him as a 'proto-greenie', notwithstanding the camel-hair shirt! But between his invective, and the sorely tested instruments of our Church's unity, we have a few pointers, at least, as we ask ourselves, 'What then, must we *do*, in order to *be for* this kingdom of righteousness? Without viewing the world through rose-tinted lenses, how can we bear active, concrete witness to where violet is approaching white – in which we, and all who wait for the 'not yet', might even now rejoice?

*Richard Treloar*