

The Rector's Chronicle

A Newsletter of the Church of St Michael the Archangel

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January, 2008

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Though it may seem strange to begin talking about Easter when we have not quite made it to Epiphany, that is where we are this year. Easter is March 23rd, the second-earliest possible date. Ash Wednesday arrives on February 6th, barely a month away. In one sense, the proximity of the Christmas part of the church year and Lent and Passiontide is just an accident of the way the dates are determined – Christmas always on the 25th of December, and Easter the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox – thus sometime between March 22nd and April 25th.

In another sense, though, having Christmas and Lent close together reminds us of the connection between the incarnation and the atonement. The Word is made flesh to fulfill God's purpose of redeeming sinful man, and offering us a way to heaven. The incarnation is the basis for the atonement. The two are inseparable. The atonement is impossible without the incarnation: it took a true man (one without sin) to offer himself as a sacrificial death in place of those who deserved to die by reason of their sin. Only such a sacrifice could satisfy both God's justice and His love. His love, which is so striking at His passion, is no less striking in the manger at Bethlehem. When He is circumcised on the eighth day, He sheds His precious blood for the first time, to enter into the Old Covenant of the law. This prefigures the shedding of His blood on Good Friday, when He institutes the New Covenant of grace. In short, His life – incarnation and atonement – is all of a piece.

This means that we should resist the temptation to drive a wedge between the incarnation and the atonement. This is a temptation for most of us at one time or another. Good Friday is a difficult day for us at best. We want to observe it properly, and to cultivate a deep sense of God's love for us through the Cross. But it is not a likely candidate for Favorite Day of the Year. Christmas, on the other hand, is – even apart from the presents. The Babe in the manger is a touching scene. This seems less threatening, less demanding, than the Man hanging on the cross, especially if we forget the profound humility which the stable manifests.

Services on Ash Wednesday will be at 10 (at the rectory) and 6:30 (at West Laurel Hill Cemetery). Ashes will be imposed at both Masses. Please bring back your palms from last Palm Sunday no later than Quinquagesima (February 3rd), so that I will have enough for the ashes on Ash Wednesday. As in the past, we will observe the Fridays in Lent with Stations of the Cross, beginning February 8th at 7 at All Saints' Church in Wynnewood.

You will need to be thinking (later in January) about your particular Lenten discipline for 2008, so that that is settled before it is time to begin on February 6th. I will put out a list with some suggestions for your consideration on the Sundays before Lent begins. It is important to undertake a discipline that is serious but not overwhelming. It should be something that brings us closer to God, and which cultivates a spirit of penitence within us.

Epiphany

Before we get to Lent, there is the Feast and season of Epiphany. The Feast is January 6th, which falls on a Sunday this year (for your convenience). We'll have the parish Christmas/Epiphany party after the ten o'clock Mass on Epiphany.

Epiphany celebrates the “manifestation” of Christ to the Gentiles. Thus it is associated in the West with the visitation of the Magi, the first non-Jews to recognize and worship our Lord. The Eastern Church focuses on Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, where His true nature is manifested not only by His humility in accepting John's baptism of repentance, but also by the Father's voice from heaven and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove upon Him. This marks the manifestation of the Holy Trinity at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. More generally, the church directs our attention to various other manifestations of Jesus' identity, as in the miracle in Cana of Galilee and the episode when the boy Jesus stays behind in the temple in Jerusalem. The text of hymn 53 provides good material for meditation before or after Mass during Epiphany.

Wills & Bequests

From the Prayer Book (page 320): *The Minister is ordered, from time to time, to advise the People, whilst they are in health, to make Wills arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods, and, when of ability, to leave Bequests for religious and charitable uses.* Let this notice fulfill that obligation. Making a will is something we tend to put off, as not usually seeming particularly urgent. Of course, we rarely know whether it is urgent or not! In most cases, it is a matter of simple courtesy to those who will

have to deal with things when we have departed this life. It is considerably more than simple courtesy when there are any significant assets. Then it is a matter of making good provision for the temporal goods, rather than leaving the disposal to the state.

When it comes to bequests, we recognize that St James the Less depended heavily on the generosity of past generations to sustain the congregation and its obligations while we were there. Property expenses grew with the age of the buildings, and would not have been manageable for us apart from the endowment income. There are certainly spiritual benefits to our present situation of having no endowments to fall back on. It helps us both to trust God, and to be conscientious in our current support of the parish. We do not, of course, know what the future holds for St Michael's. There will certainly be times when the parish has the opportunity to fulfill a particular mission, but will need some special funds to do so. Perhaps your bequest to the parish will enable us (or a future generation) to do such a good work. The rubric does not specify the parish for your bequests: you are to use your godly judgment in the matter though I would hope you would consider St Michael's). Whether or not you are in a position to leave a bequest to the church, I would suggest that you would provide in your will for the continuing payment of your regular pledge to the parish for at least the remainder of the calendar year (i.e., of your death). For the foreseeable future, that would be of help to St Michael's. Let me add that I hope none of you will need a will anytime soon!

In a similar vein, you might wish to leave instructions for donations to the parish or a favorite charity in lieu of flowers at your funeral. St Michael's has already benefited from such – the lovely white Mass set which we used at Christmas having been given in memory of John Spencer, and the equally lovely rose set which we used for the first time on Rose Sunday having been given in memory of Eirllys Lewis.

Finally, in addition to a will, you should prepare written funeral instructions. At the least, these should specify that you wish the service to be at St Michael's and under the direction of the parish priest. This is particularly important if your next of kin (or whomever will be overseeing the arrangements) is not a churchman. If I can be of help with your planning any of this, please let me know.

Prayer Boxes

A number of you are involved in the continuing intercessory work of the Prayer Box Project. We continue to receive prayer requests in the various boxes, which are collected and circulated weekly to those who have offered to pray. This runs along pretty much on its own, thanks to the efforts of Mark Johnson, Wendy Denton, and others in collecting and circulating, and generally keeping things going. While this work takes place very much in the background, it is nevertheless an important part of our mission, and deserves to be recognized. I am grateful not only to Mark and Wendy, but also to all those who pray for the needs which are brought to us. While it may not require a great deal of time, it does require faithfulness, and charity, to take on others' needs and bring them to God. In interceding we are ourselves brought closer to Him.

This is a ministry in which most of us could take part. I would invite you to join in, if you are not already involved. Speak with Mark or Wendy to be added to the circulation of the requests. We would also like to expand the number of boxes. Let us know if you have ideas of good (public) locations for prayer boxes.

Kudos

Thanks goes to:

- Gary Sugden, for doing the flowers for Christmas and Rose Sunday.
- Pat Lincoln, Chris Jordan, Wendy Denton and Jana McCann, who do the "packing up" of all the accouterments for Mass at West Laurel Hill after the Sunday Masses.
- John Hansell, who helps get everything out and set up before the Sunday Masses at West Laurel Hill.
- Barbara Freeman, for providing the creche for the West Laurel Hill chapel.
- all those, both within the parish and outside, who made special year-end contributions to St Michael's.

I want to add a word of thanks to Hal and Wendy Denton, who have made themselves a vital part of the parish for the last nine years. Hal currently serves on the vestry and as Accounting Warden; Wendy is regular at weekday Masses and helps in many ways (see above). Hal and Wendy will be moving in February to their retirement home in Maryland, and thus leaving St Michael's (though Wendy intends to join the Wednesday Bible study by long distance). We will miss them! February 10th will probably be their last Sunday, and we will plan to bid them Godspeed at coffee that day.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to thank all of you who made Christmas memorable at St Michael's this year. This includes those who brightened the rectory with cards and gifts. It was a special time for me, having all our children home for Christmas, as well as my mother, who has now moved into the rectory. Having the family together made the holiday such a special blessing this year – whether the "little" family of Ousleys, or our larger, parish family (although some of them were away at Christmas).

Faithfully,

Fr David Ousley