

The Rector's Chronicle

A Newsletter of the Church of St Michael the Archangel

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December, 2007

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Advent (which has already had a snowy beginning) draws our attention to Christ's three-fold coming: in the humble, human flesh at Bethlehem (the Incarnation), in glory and judgment at the end of the age (the Second Coming), and His coming to our hearts, to be born and dwell there. The first two define the world and its history; the third defines our lives. It would be a pity indeed if we knew about the first two but not about the third.

Advent is therefore the time to welcome Christ into our hearts, to beg Him to be born there as He was in the stable. That original birthplace should give us hope: He did not disdain the dark, smelly stable. So even if our hearts are not much better, spiritually speaking: dark, smelly, ill-kept, unworthy of human – much less divine – habitation, we need not fear to ask Jesus to come. He delights with the invitation, and has taken upon Himself to make our hearts worthy of Him, as the Bride in Revelation is washed and made white and pure in the blood of the Lamb. We need not make our hearts worthy of Him: we cannot. So we should not wait until our hearts are (as we think) worthy, but open ourselves to Him now, in our unworthiness. If He delights in dwelling in the hovel that is our heart, who are we to complain or try to convince Him that it is unfitting? Rather let us rejoice in His willingness to come to the stable, whether in Bethlehem or in our hearts. The joy is in His presence, far more than in our worthiness.

Christmas

At Christmas we celebrate that great mystery of the Word made flesh. It is a constant source of wonder for Christians, that God should empty Himself to become a man. No doubt the disciples who followed Jesus around Galilee took for granted that He was human; what was hard for them to fathom was His divinity. I suspect our situation has the opposite problem: we find it easy to believe Him divine, and tend to minimize His humanity. The manger in Bethlehem helps us to see that Jesus is fully human throughout His life on earth. How this is possible we will never completely fathom: it is after all the *mystery* of the Incarnation.

As last year, there will be a Christmas Eve Mass at the Chapel of Peace at West Laurel Hill Cemetery at 6:30 p.m. I appreciate the Cemetery's willingness to open late for us for this service. On Christmas Day, there will be a low Mass at the rectory at 10. Christmas is an Holy Day of Obligation, so I hope one of these will be convenient for everyone. The parish Christmas party will follow the ten o'clock Mass on Epiphany, January 6th, which is on a Sunday this year. Speak with Barbara Freeman if you would like to bring something for the event. In addition to the regular Sunday morning confession time (9:30-9:45), I'll be available after Mass on Saturday the 22nd and on Sunday the 23rd at 9:15. I'm happy to make arrangements for other times as well.

Karl Spaeth has again invited all of us to come to his family's private Christmas tree sale in Mertztown. The sale is this weekend, Saturday and Sunday, December 8th and 9th. You pick out a tree to your liking, and they cut and bale it for you, and help you load it onto your car. They also provide hot cider and hot chocolate, and have wreaths and greens for sale as well as trees. It makes a nice outing in the country. Be sure to tell them you are from St Michael's, since they make a donation to the parish for all St Michael's sales. Maps are available.

It does not look like we have enough singers to manage caroling in the St James neighborhood this year. Would there be interest in singing carols indoors at the rectory? Perhaps on Holy Innocents Day (Friday, December 28th)? If so, I'll move the Mass to the evening, and invite those interested to join a pot-luck supper between Mass and carols. Let us know.

Advent Quiet Day

As is our custom, we will have a Quiet Day in Advent. Advent is our preparation for Christmas, and that requires some quiet. The world's pre-Christmas season is a busy one – as the ads all around us tell us. Advent is not exactly the same as the world's pre-Christmas. We prepare for the celebration of the Incarnation of our Lord and Savior, and for that always special Holy Communion at Christmas. This preparation requires some spiritual discipline, which includes taking time to be quiet: to ponder the Incarnation, to be thankful for all that God gives us by its means, to be penitent for our failings and ingratitude. I encourage you the more to find the time to be quiet before Christmas, as it is all the harder with the busyness of this time of year. Simplicity of life is especially important this time of year (I wish I were better at it!). The Quiet Day offers one small opportunity.

We are fortunate that All Saints' Church, Wynnewood, is again offering to let us use their facilities for the Quiet Day. We begin with Mass at 9:30 in the Chapel. A light breakfast will be provided before the silence begins with the first address. We'll end by 2. Please bring your lunch. I will be giving the addresses. All Saints is in Montgomery Avenue at Gypsy Lane, a ten-minute walk from the Wynnewood train station. Let me know if you would like to come but need a ride, and I'll try to find one for you. Guests are welcome.

Advent is also a good time to add a weekday Mass to your other devotions. The weekday Masses are of a different flavor than the Sunday Mass, being quieter and more intimate. At this point, the Friday and Saturday Masses do not have any regular worshipers, except for Beth. If one of these fit your schedule, you would be doing a service to the parish, as well as your self (and of course, God, whose service it always is). The Tuesday Mass will continue at the rectory, at least through the end of the year. For those of you with cat allergies: we no longer have a cat in the rectory, Happy having died last winter.

Heuer Foundation Grant

I'm delighted to report that we have been awarded a grant again this year from the Russel P. and Elizabeth Crimian Heuer Foundation for the support of the Homework Club tutoring program. This renews for a second year the grant they made to us last year. As you may recall, the grant last year was especially useful, when we found in January that we would need to offset some security costs for our host, Laurel Hill Cemetery. In addition to providing the materials which had been envisioned in the original grant, the Foundation also covered the costs for the security. This year's grant will do likewise.

Homework Club has been providing tutoring for children in our "old" neighborhood for a number of years (I've lost count). We have been able to continue it with the help of Laurel Hill Cemetery, which provides rent-free space in the Gatehouse there. Barbara Freeman has overseen the project from its inception, and gets help from Janis Wilson, Beth Ousley, and David Reaves. With more tutors, we could help more children. How about you? Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, 4-5:30.

Organist

When I wrote last month's *Chronicle* I was optimistic (yes, that does happen sometimes) that we had found a new organist. Things did not work out, as you may have noticed. We are still looking, so if you hear of someone who might be a possibility, please let me know.

Janice Gunther will play her last service with us on Rose Sunday. She has decided to seek communion with the Roman Catholic Church. So that will also be her last Sunday with us. I am grateful for her service at the organ for us since we left St James, and even more for her faithfulness to the parish over the last three years. We will all miss her. She graduates from Penn next spring. We will have a little send-off for her at coffee after Mass on the 16th.

Stewardship

The annual stewardship program is now in progress. Again this year, the vestry is contacting all active parishioners to provide information on the state of the parish, and to hear any questions or concerns which you may have. They are also distributing the pledge cards along with the other information. We would like all the pledge cards returned by Rose Sunday, December 16th. They can be placed in the Sunday offering, or mailed to the rectory. Knowing our likely income will allow the vestry to prepare a reasonable budget for 2008. We have done well financially since we left St James, for three reasons: your generosity, the vestry's careful watch on expenses, and our freedom from building expenses as the result of West Laurel Hill Cemetery's generosity in letting us use the Chapel of Peace without cost. All three factors are cause for thanksgiving!

The 2008 Ordo Calendars should be here soon. I will distribute them at Mass. If you would like one mailed, let me know. They come again this year courtesy of Turner's Funeral Home, now located at West Laurel Hill Cemetery. As always, I'm grateful that they are willing to sponsor the calendars. This year's edition has a photograph of one of Chris Jordan's Stations of the Cross, which we use for the devotions at All Saints during Lent. Thanks also to Chris for letting us use the illustration.

Finally I'd like to share with you a heart-warming story about an early Christmas gift. One of our college students, Zachary Smith (a sophomore at Cheyney), will be going to North Carolina to donate a kidney to an older cousin with renal failure. Has has already been down there for over a week during the fall term for preparatory tests. At this writing he is to leave on December 10th (though it might be a week later), returning January 16th. This means he will miss his finals from the fall term, as well as the beginning of the spring term. They have told him that he will be in the hospital for the surgery at least ten days. We admire him for his generosity in donating one of his kidneys, and his willingness to make the practical sacrifices entailed in doing it. Please pray for him.

Kudos

Thanks this month to:

- Barbara Freeman, for providing the Advent Wreath.
- Millie Berghaus, for folding and stuffing last Month's *Chronicle*, as well as the stewardship mailing to parishioners.
- all those who contributed to, wrapped, and helped put together fourteen Christmas "shoe boxes" for needy children around the world, and especially to Angela Johnson for overseeing the operation.
- the goodly company of those who braved the elements and dicey travel to be at Mass on Advent Sunday.

Faithfully,

Fr David Ousley