

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

Advent 2

Preacher

9 December 2007

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Rector**

Readings: Isaiah 11. 1-10; Psalm 72. 1-7, 18-21; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12

Putting people first

Today I want to share with you a story, a powerful moving story. Perhaps you have read it, but it bears repeating, hearing. Some stories are better heard than read! It says something important to us about the choices we make and the way we live in relationship to others. But first by way of introduction a few words about today's scripture readings— there's a link to my story as I hope you will see! James Alison, the contemporary Catholic theologian says, "One of the functions of liturgy – the word we use for our corporate worship, (liturgy literally means the work of the people) - is to prod us into life". To help us become the people God made us to be. The different voices of Scripture contained in our readings during Advent summon us to concentrate on the One who is coming as part of our journey of transformation; re-birth is what Jesus calls it. James Alison puts it like this, "Our new self is quickened into existence as the Spirit awakens in us someone we didn't know we were, but who turns out to be more ourselves than we thought we knew."

The Isaiah reading is one full of promise and of life. Promise of what the One who is coming will be like, displaying a new kind of leadership and wisdom, which will usher in a new order of peace and harmony. Isaiah paints an idyllic picture, the wolf lying down with the lamb, the lion eating straw like an ox. It's a vision of hope and longing. Is such peace possible? Is it just mere wishful thinking? We might be tempted to say "pigs might fly!" Dare we dream and hope that such a vision might be actualised?

Emily Dickson's definition of hope captures what we have a hard time defining. Hope is not blend optimism, nor arrogant certainty, nor wishful thinking. Hope is the knowledge that God would not desert us, that we will endure difficult times to see a better day. Hope gives us the strength to seek peace and demand justice, and to envision the world as God intended it to be. The Hebrew people in Isaiah's day were enduring difficult times, they were in captivity in Babylon and yet Isaiah has the faith to hope and prophesy as he does!

The passage from Romans reminds us that the One who came is the truth of God and fulfilled the promise of the patriarchs. Our access to the truth, the sign that the One who is to come has come, is shown in living out the first fruits of that coming – dwelling on harmony with one another. We are to welcome each other as Christ welcomed us! This leads to life and an abundant and vibrant hope. John's message is about the need for change. There is a need for change of heart and mind if we are to measure up to what the One who is coming calls from us. Is such a change possible? The testimony of much of human history would tend to make one pessimistic about answering that question in the affirmative! It suggests that the harmony of Isaiah's vision, and of Paul's exhortation are nothing but unrealistic pipe-dreams. So often we see people failing to live up to what it is to be fully human. Rather they act out the worst aspects of human behaviour; selfishness and violence. Yet occasionally there is reason for hope and optimism, when we find within ourselves and see in others a wisdom and generosity of Spirit we didn't know we had and didn't expect in others. When what is best and true and noble rose to the surface and we catch a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be and hope springs eternal. Which brings me to my story – it goes like this!

At a fund raising dinner for a school that serves learning-disabled children, the father of one of the students delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he offered a question: "When not interfered with by outside influences, everything nature does is done with perfection. Yet my son, Shay, cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is the natural order of things in my son?"

The audience was stilled by the query.

The father continued. "I believe that when a child like Shay, physically and mentally handicapped comes into the world, an opportunity to realize true human nature presents itself, and it comes in the way other people treat that child."

Then he told the following story:

Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?" Shay's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team, but the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play, it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging and some confidence to be accepted by others in spite of his handicaps.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked (not expecting much) if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance and said, "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning."

Shay struggled over to the team's bench and, with a broad smile, put on a team shirt. His Father watched with a small tear in his eye and warmth in his heart. The boys saw the father's joy at his son being accepted. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat.

At this juncture, do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball.

However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside for this moment in Shay's life, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least make contact. The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher.

The game would now be over. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game.

Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the first baseman's head, out of reach of all team mates. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, "Shay, run to first! Run to first!" Never in his life had Shay ever run that far, but he made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled.

Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to the base. By the time Shay rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball ... the smallest guy on their team who now had his first chance to be the hero for his team. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head. Shay ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home.

All were screaming, "Shay, Shay, Shay, all the Way Shay"

Shay reached third base because the opposing shortstop ran to help him by turning him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third! Shay, run to third!"

As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators, were on their feet screaming, "Shay, run home! Run home!" Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the grand slam and won the game for his team.

"That day", said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world".

Shay didn't make it to another summer. He died that winter, having never forgotten being the hero and making his father so happy, and coming home and seeing his Mother tearfully embrace her little hero of the day!

A wise man once said every society is judged by how it treats it's least fortunate amongst them.

The E-mail that sent me that story this week said in closing, "The person who sent you this believes that we all can make a difference. We all have thousands of opportunities to help realize the "natural order of things." So many seemingly trivial interactions between two people present us with a choice: Do we pass along a little spark of love and humanity or do we pass up those opportunities and leave the world a little bit colder in the process? "

It then said, "You now have two choices:

1. Delete
2. Forward"

Well I didn't have everyone's e-mail address to forward it on to, so I've done it this way.

It seems to me that the children from the 2 teams in the story were acting in the way God intends us to relate to one another – putting people first. They set aside the usual competitiveness of the world, that says winning is all that matters – and in so doing everyone one – especially Shay. May we find ways of showing the same sensitivity and wisdom and help make the world what God intended it to be and so help hope to flourish.

May your day, be a Shay Day.