

Deacon Bryan's Homily 4th Sunday in Advent – Year A

I write this homily sitting in a cabin at East's Beach near Kiama. It has been hot the last couple of days, it's now cold and raining, the surf was good yesterday. That perennial surfing lament *"You should have been here yesterday"*. As I ponder today's readings I'm struck by the puzzle that we as humans are so often so preoccupied with lamenting what we have missed out on that we completely fail to embrace the here and now. There is an old monastic saying: *"Yesterday is gone, its history, you can't change it; tomorrow is a gift you may or may not get; all we have is the here and now, the moment."* Yet we constantly find ourselves worrying about our past deeds and opportunities missed while formulating grandiose plans that will right past wrongs and seize new opportunities. We do however need to plan but we do need to take care that our lives are not consumed by the tomorrow that we miss the message of today.

Life is not simple but we can over complicate it. Today's readings beautifully illustrate this enigma. In the first reading the Prophet Isaiah is talking to Ahaz (AY-haz) the King of Judah. Now in the time of Isaiah, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Judah the Southern kingdom and Israel the Northern kingdom. Now Ahaz had real problems, the Northern Kingdom and the Kingdom of Syria were joining forces to conquer Judah and capture Jerusalem. Earlier in this chapter Isaiah tells us that the thought of the impending conflict causes the King's and the people's hearts to shake like the trees of the forest in a wind. (Isa 7.2) In the mist of this impending doom Isaiah tells Ahaz to be calm, God is with him and the impending invasion will not happen. Isaiah is clearly exasperated with Ahaz as

he says to Ahaz; ask yourself for a sign from God. To which Ahaz replies “I’ve got enough problems with Syria and Israel without upsetting God also, by asking Him for a proof of your prophecy.” At this point Isaiah tells Ahaz he is trying everybody’s patience and God will send a sign anyway. Isaiah prophesies the virgin birth of the long awaited Messiah. Ahaz seems to completely miss the moment. He is so embroiled in his own issues that he does not even make the common mistake of seeing the Messiah as a great general who will save Judah from the invaders.

If Ahaz missed the point and failed to recognise God in the moment, Mary is completely the opposite—she lives in the moment and recognises God in the moment. The older I get the more I appreciate Mary and Joseph. We see ourselves as sophisticated people and earlier generations as comparatively backward but I think all generations see themselves in that light. In their time Mary and Joseph would have seen themselves as a normal devout Jewish couple engaged to be married. Then suddenly Mary announces she is expecting a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. How would I feel if I was Joseph or Mary’s Dad or Joseph’s Dad? In the time of Mary and Joseph spirits were an accepted fact, illness was attributed to unclean spirits, Jesus Himself casted out spirits, Roman and Greek religious practices were based around a world inhabited by many gods or spirits. Nevertheless, Mary’s pregnancy and her explanation would have tested her relationships with her family and Joseph. Joseph clearly initially did not believe her. He had been dishonoured. Mary had clearly been unfaithful to him. Joseph just wanted the whole sorry mess to go away with the least amount of fuss possible. Then like Mary an Angel of the Lord tells him not to be afraid, and like Mary he recognises God in the moment. Joseph and Mary recognise that they are part of the redemption history of the Jewish

people. They are to have a child and that child will be the Messiah. Being devout Jews they would have both been aware that the Messiah would be of the House of David, born of a virgin. I can't imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph as they were thrust into the pivotal moment in history—their child was to be the Messiah and they simply got on with it. How? Mary and Joseph recognised that God was with them.

Ahaz, Mary and Joseph all meet God at times of total chaos in their lives. In each case God tried to reassure them, saying don't be afraid I am with you. Notice I used the word tried in the last sentence. God the creator of the universe, by virtue of His gift to us of free will, can only offer to be with us on our journey. We are free to reject his offer like Ahaz or accept it like Mary and Joseph. The choice is ours. Our choice is often influenced by our ego and how we perceive God. Ahaz was a ruler of a nation and clearly saw God as just another entity he had to deal with. Mary and Joseph in contrast were humble servants of their God.

Humility in our society is seen as a sign of weakness. True humility is a virtue. Humble people are not weak—they simply know their place before God, they realise that their God is always with them in the chaos of their lives. If we want God to walk with us we have to be humble enough to allow him. If my Sunday Eucharist is just another thing I have to deal with then I'm no different to Ahaz. God is just another entity I have to deal with and preferably not upset. Ahaz believed in God but did not let God into his life. Mary and Joseph conversely allow God into the chaos of their lives. Theirs is a God who is involved, a God who is not a fixer, a God who walks with them. They still have to endure chaos but having the Creator of the Universe with them allows them to see God in the moment. Humble people have the strength to face their lives—they still get it wrong,

they still make mistakes, but in the messiness they find God. A God who like a gentle parent allows them to learn and grow in the messiness that is their lives. The secret is to have the humility to be like Mary and Joseph and allow God into our lives and live with Him in the moment. In this the last week of Advent I plan to seek humility in the chaos and find God in the moment.

Deacon George Bryan

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