

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



All Saints' to Advent - November 2011

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, Upon returning from a six week semi-sabbatical I found the wardens apologetic because they had hoped to have surprised me with a freshly painted parish office. Instead, the office is a work in progress. As usual, one property issue lead to another, and work could not proceed on the hoped for schedule. Someone along the way asked me whether I was surprised by what I found in the office. I answered that I would have been much more surprised if all had gone as planned. Years of experience at St Paul's have taught me that all good things take time - more time than we imagine.

Seasoned though I might be in the art of waiting, I can tell you that I still get impatient with late trains and slow internet response. A dithering driver on the highway can bring forth a torrent of abuse - soto voce, of course! After all, I am a creature of our time. All around us is the cry for instant gratification. Fast food restaurants, buy-now-pay-later plans, and the very idea of running up massive credit card debt are all symptoms of a people who want it all now. Ancient wisdom says that a cold or flu requires rest. Far too many of us want a pill or syrup that does little more than mask the symptoms so we can get on with life. Even the art of gardening - surely an activity that should require patience and nurturing - has spawned a landscaping "industry" which avoids time consuming cultivation and simply replaces old plants with new.

The quick fix is practically an article of faith - blind faith. When the economic mudslide began in 2008, most hoped that there would be an easy solution. Bail out the banks or General Motors! Elect a new president! Some ideas of a quick fix negated other ideas. Lower taxes! Raise taxes! All the ideas may have some merit. Undoubtedly all should on the table for discussion. However, the idea of the "quick fix" is delusional. Perhaps it is the result of too many Disney cartoons where fairy godmothers wave their magic wands and good things happen. In the real world things take time, they run their course. Sensible people cannot expect a government to legislate and make all problems instantly go away. In fairness, not everyone expects that, but far too many think only in terms of short term gain. Do something now to create an immediate sense of relief, even though it will cause a much bigger problem down the road. So, for example, we might loosen environmental regulations so that we can get cheaper gas now, which will cause further deterioration of the quality of life on the planet. In the end the real long term problem of providing adequate mobility for an ever increasing human population will be further from a solution.

The month of November began with the celebration of All Saints'. These were (and are) men and women who hoped and lived for the best - even in the worst of times. So the Prophet Jeremiah could write, "**Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**" (Jeremiah 29:4-7) In other words, in the midst of the worst of times do the best of things.

Our prayer is for the welfare of the city to which we have been sent, but our hope is for an even greater city - one not made with human hands. The Christian vision of a restored creation goes well beyond the structures and restrictions of the world in which we live. It is not going to be the result of political action or financial wisdom. It is not the product of charitable behavior or reformed morals. Our faith vision of the kingdom of God is of a world gathered into the intimate presence of an all embracing, loving God - a state of pure praise! St John describes it this way, "**After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'**" (Revelation 7:9-10) In this new creation there will be no hunger, no thirst, no suffering or injustice. God will wipe away every tear. That kingdom is assured to us by our Lord Jesus who died and rose again. He is alive! He is with us! In Eucharist (thanksgiving) we feed on his life, his love, and his strength. Nothing can separate us from him. He is with us always even to the end of the age.

None of this socio-economic observation might have been raised in the church's Newsletter, had not some of our politicians and political "wannabees" tried recently to drag our Lord Jesus onto their platforms. I have heard preachers blather about their political preferences. Some of them have been downright disgusting like Pat Robertson urging people to "take out" the elected president of Venezuela! (Did Jesus ever authorize the "taking out" of any irritating politician?) But those are preachers. Preachers are often given to excess gas! However, when politicians try to turn the Lord Jesus into one of their party backers by turning pre-election pep-rallies into prayer meetings, I take serious issue!

Christians await the kingdom, but never on the sidelines of human life. We are called to get on with life - to pray and work for the welfare of the city in which we find ourselves. The very first Christians, we are told, lived with a flush of excitement that the new creation was just around the corner. Many asked, "When will this be?" Jesus was very clear, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons." All is in God's hands. We 21st century instant gratification seekers can certainly understand that people get impatient. The Second Letter of Peter is believed to have been written sometime in the second Christian century. In the midst of persecution and suffering many saints may have groaned, "How long, O Lord, How long!" And so the Apostle said, "**But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.**" (II Peter 3:8) He who is before all ages encompasses all time and space. He is beyond our understanding. However in this we can place our hope, that we see him most clearly of all in the gentle, loving face of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who blessed the lowest and the least, has

made known the justice, mercy, and peace that is the very heart of the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Part of our time away was spent in Armenia. Tucked away in the Caucasus Mountains it is on the frontier of Europe and Asia. (The plane we boarded in London was headed for Iran, but we got off in Armenia.) There are about of 3,000,000 Armenians in the new republic and another 8,000,000 scattered in communities around the world. They believe that two of Jesus' apostles - Bartholomew and Thaddeus - first preached the Gospel among them, but it was at the end of the third Christian century that a monk named Gregory was able to heal the sickness of a rather nasty king who had actually held him in prison for many years. As a result the king was baptized and in 301 declared Christianity to be the official religion of all Armenians. Gregory, called the Illuminator or Light-bringer, was made the first Catholicos (Archbishop) of the Armenian Church. Conversion did not come all at once, but over time Armenians embraced the Christian faith. "That was our undoing." said our guide in jest. Armenia is on the crossroads of nations and peoples. For over 1700 years they have had to fight to maintain their identity as a people and their Christian faith. Romans, Byzantine Greeks, Persians, Tartars, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Ottoman Turks, Czarist Russians, and Soviet Russians - all these people over ran the Armenians, and either by brute force or slow and painful repression sought to break them. Most of the conquerors tried to destroy their faith. Their twenty year old independence did not bring them immediate relief either. They were struck by a ruined post-Soviet economy, a war with neighboring Azerbaijan, and, in the late 1980's, a massive, murderous earthquake. Through all, it was faith that kept (and keeps) them going. When they could, they prayed for the welfare of city and tried to work with their conquerors, but they never gave up the vision of the kingdom of God, clinging to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I would not suggest that every decision they made was good or that all Armenians were paragons of Christian virtue, but the example of their endurance, their faithfulness, and their ability to take the long, long view and see many things with something approaching God's perspective has much to teach us.

Dwellers in an imperfect world filled with injustice and suffering, we are far too often given to mere wishful thinking, looking for quick fixes and instant cures. Better we should cultivate more of God's perspective. Better we should put our trust in him who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. Why should we not trust him, who reveals himself in the face of a loving Lord and Savior? Perhaps our choices as we get on with life and continue to pray and work for the welfare of the city in which we find ourselves would be better if we surrendered our craving for instant gratification. The last word in the Bible at the end of St John's glorious vision says, "***The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.***" (Revelation 22:20-21)

Father Martin +

Website: www.stpaulscamdennj.org

Email: revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org