

Advent Sunday

with the Kirkin' o' the Tartan

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 28 November 2010, by David Gill. It was Advent Sunday, with visitors of Scottish ancestry attending for the ceremony known as the Kirkin' o' the Tartan. Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5 and St Matthew 24:36-44.

On behalf of St Stephen's, I welcome all who are here this morning to begin Sydney's day of Scottish festivities with the ceremony of the Kirkin' o' the Tartan. In particular, we welcome the chief of today's events, the 28th Chief of the Clan Maclean, Sir Lachlan Maclean.

I must begin with a confession. It is this.

Although I grew up listening to my father's strong Glaswegian accent, although I was taught all about kilts and their complicated accoutrements, although by the age of ten I could squeeze a passable tune out of a set of bagpipes, although I'd learned that you can't trust the English, that Gaelic is the language of heaven and that God is an elder of the Church of Scotland, there was nevertheless one glaring gap in my ethnic education. Not once had I heard of the Kirkin' o' the Tartan.

With today's service in the offing, some detective work was required. So I did some checking. And here is what I discovered.

The ritual, as it exists today, stems from the situation in Scotland in the mid 18th century. The Battle of Culloden had taken place in April 1746. Troops loyal to England's Hanoverian King George had defeated the Highlanders loyal to the Jacobite monarchy led by Charles Edward Stuart – popularly known as Bonnie Prince Charlie. The victors moved quickly, and brutally, to bring the rebels to heel.

Under tough laws adopted by parliament in London, you were not permitted to wear tartan, speak Gaelic, play the pipes or otherwise flaunt your separatist

identity. The intention seems to have been to break the spirit of the rebels, destroy their clan system and assimilate the Highlanders into the English nation.

Well, assimilation sounds great – provided you happen to be in the dominant group that's calling the shots. As Australia's indigenous people as well as other, newer arrivals in this country keep telling us, it doesn't sound nearly as great if it's your culture that's about to be destroyed, your identity that's going to be wiped out.

The Scots, understandably, resisted. Their resistance had to be covert, and one of the tricks they came up with – and this may be fact, legend or a mixture of both – was the kirkin' o' the tartan. Yes, the wearing of tartan was banned – try it and you'd get six months behind bars, try it again and you'd be transported to the colonies. But those canny Scots started taking symbolic pieces of tartan, hidden on their persons, to the church (= kirk), there to pray for God's blessing on the tartans and all they represented.

The churching of the tartan was an act of revolutionary longing. An act that said ok, we're in this situation, but our hearts refuse to be bound by it. We will look beyond the here and now. We will pray, and dream, and live for a new day.

They were able to see beyond the tragedy, to dream beyond the nightmare, to hope beyond the pain.

Today, we heard two readings that do the same. Both ask us to look beyond the here and now. Both speak powerfully, tantalizingly, of hope. Together, on this first Sunday of Advent, they set the tone for our four weeks of solemn preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth.

Advent begins not where the world thinks it begins, with tinsel and vacuous partying, but with the mysterious purposes of a Christ-shaped God. It calls us to remember his reign before we talk about his nativity, to await his final coming even as we await his birth.

First, from the Hebrew scriptures, there was the message of Isaiah. It was written to people who knew only too well the reality of heartbreak, exile and destruction. Look further, he says to them. There will be a new interaction between “the mountain of the Lord” – representing God’s presence among us – and the human story. The divine purpose will shine forth afresh. Weapons of war will become instruments of peace. Come, he pleads, let us walk in the light of the Lord, let us live in the hope we have been given.

Second, from the Christian scriptures, that passage from Matthew’s version of the gospel, with its reference to the coming of Christ in judgement and in glory. Look beyond immediate pressures and issues, he says. Don’t engage in idle speculation about the end, but wait, watch, be ready for the dawn of the time beyond time.

The future is God’s. So focus on what this means for the present. And live that hope.

Eleven years ago, East Timor was burning. We watched those terrible scenes, every night, on the evening news. I saw some of it at first hand. My unsung heroes of East Timor were the ordinary church workers, lay as well as ordained, who sometimes at great risk kept on caring for their people in the name of a love that would not let them go.

Like that Carmelite nun from the Philippines, who kept running the gauntlet of a notorious militia group to take food and medical supplies to a concentration of internally displaced people near Liquica, outside Dili. The UN could not get through. No NGO would risk it. She did, daily, carrying her bulging backpack, armed only with a joyful smile that suggested not a worry in the world. Quite a contrast to the introverted fretfulness that sometimes passes for Christian witness here in Sydney.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord, let us live the hope we have been given.

We have heard again those ancient words of yearning and hope. Our hearts cry out: can it be true? Can it really be true? Is it possible, is it just possible, that this is the way things really are?

Today, some of you have placed your tartans before Christ's holy table. I invite you to place your hearts and lives there also. And to enter into Advent praying that it may help each and every one of us awaken afresh to the hope of the ages.

The second assembly of the World Council of Churches, in 1954, had as its theme "Jesus Christ, the Hope of the World". As it concluded, that vast gathering addressed a letter to all its member churches, a letter that ended with these powerful words:

"We do not know what is coming. But we do know who is coming. It is Jesus Christ, who meets us every day and will meet us at the end. Therefore we say to you: Rejoice in hope!"

Today, on this Advent Sunday, I say to you: rejoice in hope! And prepare yourselves to mark again the great and mighty wonder that is beyond words.

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