

Advent Sunday and St Andrew's Day

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 30 November 2014, by David Gill. It was Advent Sunday and St Andrew's Day, with visitors of Scottish ancestry attending for the ceremony of the Kirkin' o' the Tartan. Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9 and St Mark 13:24-37.

On behalf of St Stephen's, I welcome all who are here this morning to begin Sydney's day of Scottish festivities with the Kirkin' o' the Tartan. Welcome, in particular, to members of the Scottish Australian Heritage Council as well as representatives of the various clans.

Some at this service are of Scottish birth or ancestry. Some have no connection with Scotland. And some of us, part Scots and part lots of other things, are mixtures -- like many Australians, we are ethnic mongrels and proud of it. So a couple of explanations may be in order.

First, today is St Andrew's Day. Andrew, formerly a Galilean fisherman, then one of Jesus' disciples, is the patron saint of Scotland. He is also patron saint of Greece, Russia, Romania, Ukraine, Sicily, Cyprus and Barbados. If that weren't enough, he's also patron saint of fishermen, rope-makers, singers, women wishing to become pregnant, victims of gout and people with sore throats. A busy man!

Second, the kirkin' -- that is, the churching -- of the tartan. What is it all about?

The ritual takes us back to the situation in Scotland in the mid 18th century. At the Battle of Culloden (1746), England's King George had defeated Highlanders loyal to the Jacobite monarchy led by Charles Edward Stuart -- popularly known as Bonnie Prince Charlie. The English moved quickly, and brutally, to bring the rebels to heel.

Among other measures, tough laws adopted by parliament in London meant that you were not permitted to wear tartan, speak Gaelic, play the bagpipes 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, assimilation 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, were not too thrilled about this. They resisted assimilation. Their resistance had to be covert, of course, and one of the tricks they came up with – and this may be fact, fabrication 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, there to pray for God's blessing on the tartans and all they represented.

The churching of the tartan was, and still is, an assertion of a particular cultural identity. That's something Australia today not only tolerates but welcomes. Especially when it comes with an invitation to others to join in the fun.

Some years back, I was wandering up George Street, alongside the Queen Victoria Building. It's a wonderful old building. Its aging stones and imposing domes. And out front, the old monarch herself, enthroned in regal splendour, gazing out over the city she never saw.

On that day, I realized, something special was happening. Through the QVB's dignified arches came sounds of merriment. Cymbals, gongs, drums, the works. Someone clearly was having a ball. And a rather unBritish ball at that.

Suddenly, out through the front door danced ... a dragon. The penny dropped. This was the first day of the Chinese New Year. Fireworks added to the pandemonium. Passers-by stopped, transfixed. The instant crowd comprised Anglos, Indians or Pakistanis, what looked like a family of Pacific Islanders, maybe others. Everyone loves a party. This one, you could see them thinking, promises to be a real ripper.

Here was the old Australia giving birth, joyfully, to the new, Here were people from one culture, helping others to celebrate the exhilarating experience of being a community of many cultures.

And there was old Queen Victoria, gazing calm and untroubled over the happy multicultural scrum that had formed so spontaneously at her feet.

Yes, I know, we still have our ugly outbursts of racism and intolerance. Muslim Australians run into them all too often. But Chinese New Year at the QVB suggested there may be hope for us yet. One of these days, who knows, even Queen Victoria may be amused and descend from her pedestal to join the fun!

But back to those 18th century Scots. Yes, they were asserting their cultural identity. But with those little bits of tartan they were doing something more. Something blatantly subversive. They were expressing hope, defiant hope.

They were saying OK, we're in this situation, but we 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 striving to see beyond the tragedy, to dream beyond the nightmare, to hope beyond the pain.

Today, our two readings do the same. Both summon us to look beyond the here and now. Both speak powerfully, tantalizingly, of hope. On this first Sunday of Advent, they set the tone as we begin our approach a new celebration of Christ's birth.

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

First, from the Hebrew scriptures, we heard the message of Isaiah. It was written for people who knew only too well the reality of heartbreak, exile and destruction. We know we're in a mess, the prophet says to God. We feel bereft, forgotten. Yet still we are yours. In spite of everything, we are yours. We long to glimpse your face.

Second, from the Christian scriptures, we heard a passage from Mark's version of the gospel. It's the climax of Jesus' final address to his disciples. Be ready, he says to them. Keep your eyes open for God. Maintain the defiance of faith.

Jesus' last words become his first words to us in this new Church year. Don't just accept the world as it is. Be awake to what's happening. Be ready for the One who comes.

Hearing those ancient words again, we wonder. Are they true? Is this the way things really are? Beyond the chaos of here and now, can there really be that gracious Reality the ages have called ... God?

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 the 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 that hope! Prepare yourselves to mark again a great and mighty wonder that is beyond words.

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