

CHRISTMAS 2022

The Word became flesh,
and dwelt among us.

St. John 1:14

Dear Friends in Christ;

Are you ready?

Whether it's the members of a local hockey team or a young performer on the piano or the presentation you have to make at work, everything takes preparation. Before every important event, you train, or practice, or rehearse. And on the big day itself, you give your very best. And then, afterwards – especially if your team has won or the performance or presentation has been a great success – you finally get a chance to celebrate. Preparation, training, practice, rehearsal: without these things, we can achieve very little. The game, the presentation and the performance all rely on them.

And so it is with Christmas. There are the presents to be bought and wrapped and mailed or delivered. There is the shopping to be done for food and all the other things that help fill out our celebration. For many, this month will be filled with lots of crowded, hectic days; that is if the parking lot at Costco is any indication! And, finally, when all of this is done, then we will give of our best, and celebrate.

I encourage everyone, throughout what remains of the Season of Advent, to ensure that we not forget the most important pre-Christmas preparation of all, without which we can never properly celebrate, which is, of course, the preparation of hearts and souls. For Christmas is above all a feast of heart and mind. It's about love: God's love for us, and that love entering into our world as a tiny, helpless, newborn baby. As our Gospel reading each year on Christmas Day tells us, God's love takes human shape in an infant: 'The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.'

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

But still the question remains. Are we prepared? Are we ready to welcome the Christ Child? And, in order to answer that question, may I suggest to you three tests?

The first test of our readiness has to be the state of our relationships. If Christmas is God's love for



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us, it must also be our love for others. Yet time and time again, as a priest and pastor, I have met people who tell me how much they dread Christmas. Some have associated it since childhood with harsh words and tensions at home. And sadly it's true that there is more stress and conflict and bitterness in the home at Christmas than at any other time of the year. It is such a bitter irony that what should be above all a feast and festival of the family and of love is, for so many, a time of unhappiness and fear and pain. And even if our personal experiences are not as dramatic as that, our celebration of Christmas will always be hollow if we try to be civil to our coworkers and neighbours and uncaring to those closest to us. If there is bitterness or division within your family, if there is conflict and estrangement between you and someone close to you, then Advent is the time for healing, for making the effort to put things right, by God's grace.

And then, this season should be a reminder that if our love is to mean anything it has to be down to earth and practical: after all, the 'Word became flesh'. That's the second test. It's about care, real care, for those less fortunate than we are. Jesus was not born in a palace or even a desirable Fredericton residence. He was born in the place where the farm animals were kept. He did not just enter into our world. He entered into our poverty as well; and later, when his mother presented him in the temple it was with the offering of the poor: a pair of turtle doves. And because God never does anything by accident, the manner of Christ's coming was a deliberate choice by God to identify with the poor. And that means that our own Christmases will be incomplete unless we do the same. Use the Season of Advent to turn your Christmas outward rather than inward: and use Christmas to shape your actions for the entire year. Poverty exists every day, and so should our generosity.

But in the end, we will only get our relationships with family and friends right; and will only do everything that we can for the poor and those on the margins of society; if our hearts are full of love; in other words, if our hearts are full of God. That's the third test. That's why Advent is a penitential season: the Christ Child came not just to be our brother and our friend but also to be our Saviour and our Judge. His mission was a mission of mercy, a mission of rescue. As the angel said to Joseph, 'Mary will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' *Jesus*, or in Hebrew *Joshua*, means *God saves*. But to be saved, we first have to know our need of salvation, and open our hearts to this Saviour who comes to rescue us.

Ask yourself – and answer honestly – when Christmas comes and you welcome others to your home, will you also welcome the Lord? Will the inn door be open to everyone except the Saviour? If so, then use this Advent to prepare a place in your heart for him. Otherwise, you might yet again have everything ready for Christmas and not be prepared at all. The real Christmas takes place in the heart.

Janice and I wish each and every one of you a holy and happy Christmas. And we hope to see you as we gather together at St. Mary's as God's Family at the stable and at the altar: to be renewed and strengthened with the vision of God's love in human flesh.

In Christ's Love,

Fr. Kevin M. Stockall
Priest and Rector

Schedule of Services for Christmas

Saturday, December 24: The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

CHRISTMAS EVE

5:00 p.m. – Holy Eucharist for the Nativity

7:00 p.m. – Holy Eucharist for the Nativity

Sunday, December 25: The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

CHRISTMAS DAY

9:30 a.m. – Morning Prayer

10:00 a.m. – Holy Eucharist of the Nativity

Monday, December 26: St. Stephen the Martyr

9:30 a.m. – Morning Prayer

10:00 a.m. – Holy Eucharist

Tuesday, December 27: St. John the Apostle and Evangelist

9:30 a.m. – Morning Prayer

10:00 a.m. – Holy Eucharist

Wednesday, December 28: Holy Innocents' Day

6:30 p.m. – Evening Prayer

7:00 p.m. – Holy Eucharist



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