

Sermon: 2020/12/06 (2nd Sunday in Advent, Year B) - *Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8_BTR*

[Invite children to the front. Ask for a pair of volunteers to light a candle each on the Advent wreath.]

Kids' Talk: Isaiah - The Earth Will Dissolve and the Truth Will be Disclosed

[Get out a tub of ice-cream, scoop some into a mini fondue kit over a flame. (Hidden inside the ice-cream is a laminated slip of paper with the word "TRUTH" written on it.)]

From the Old Testament this morning we heard a prophet speaking: Isaiah. And he said some rather surprising things, didn't he! God had given him a vision - *a scary vision* - of the *very* distant future.

First, he spoke of the earth - our planet; *our home*, which is being represented by this ice-cream.

And he warned us that it isn't permanent: eventually, one day, it would, he said, 'dissolve', which means "melts."

But that's not all he saw and said:
God also showed Isaiah that this was a *good* thing(!), because when the earth dissolves something important would be 'disclosed' - which means "set free," "released," or "revealed."
And do you know what that thing is?

[Remove slip from melted ice-cream.]

The truth.

All of everyone's secrets.

Not just what we did visibly and publicly.

But our innermost thoughts.

The things we have hidden.

And these Jesus will use to make His determination; His *judgment* about who gets saved and goes to Heaven.

In other words, we should welcome *dissolution* and *disclosure* because they will be swiftly followed (soon after) by the (eternal, *unending*) delights of "Heaven."

Let's pray:

"Saint Nicholas"

I've heard it said that Advent - this peculiar season we're in - is a period where we (Christians) practice *in particular* the discipline of being patient.

That is to say: that it is *especially* a time for being reminded that life - *all* life - is a preparation;

a waiting...

for a *very* special guest to arrive.

I think you know of Whom I speak... [Point up.]

But, looking around *out there* [point to the door], you might be a little confused about *who* it is that we're supposed to be getting ready for.

I drive pass yards and neighbourhoods and see life-size - sometimes giant(!) - blow-up inflatables of a character who isn't the Savior.

I see this (same) imposter's face on greeting-cards,

in windows,

on wrapping-paper...

I hear songs telling me to "watch out" for him; and, "not cry," because he's "coming to town."

I see rosy-cheeked porcelain figurines of him standing on window-sills and mantelpieces - sometimes he's sat in a sleigh, or making a snow-man or, occasionally, kneeling piously by a manger.

I know that this imposter isn't the Savior because of a number of "tell-tale" 'signs'.

[A reference to previous week's Bible readings: Mt. 16:3 & 24:4; Mk. 13:22.]

Clothing, for example:

this imposter that I see pictures of in the stores and on candy-wrappers and on the TV, wears neither the simple robes the Savior was garbed in on His initial visit - that is, the "simple robes" - probably browns and greys, woven from a coarse fabric like goat-hair or perhaps from flax - that a first century Galilean rabbi from Palestine typically had access to.

Nor does this "imposter" have on his person the fabulous luminescent white and gold regalia described in (the Book of) *Revelation* at the Savior's "Second Coming."

No, instead, this imposter tends to be depicted in a thick, *luxurious* lipstick-red fur with a snowy contrasting trim.

He usually has a bobble-hat on his head, and often gloves on his hands - clothing not at *all* suitable for the "Middle East," but more in keeping with the climate of...

oh, I don't know, somewhere like the "North Pole."

And that this might be this person's residence is suggested too by the company he keeps - a small herd of reindeer.

Who is this imposter stealing so much of the Savior's "limelight"?

You've guessed, of course:

The Santa Claus.

So how did the jolly fatman come to displace and, let's face it, in many of our homes, *dominate*, a feast-day originally dedicated *solely* to someone much, much, *much* more remarkable: *God*

- the Creator Himself, in the vulnerable, *awfully* fragile form of a baby.

How has this recent development come to pass?

Not all at once, actually.

Only slowly over many centuries.

But it happened for reasons something like this -

Today - the 6th of December - is the day on which *in the most ancient ecclesial traditions* - Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra is honoured.

And Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra - *Sinterklaas* in Dutch, is the genuine, *historical* person behind our modern meme of "Santa."

He was a famous and beloved bishop in the fourth century in what is today the country of Turkey, but back then it was a Greek-speaking region in the (eastern) Roman Empire.

And all the legends about him - pretty much, with an exception or two - concern his ministry to children.

Again and again, his legend relates miracles of either rescuing (young) boys and girls from danger, or giving them generous gifts.

It seems to have been his *singular* passion - caring for the "little ones" in his diocese.

And that was his legacy; his *example*.

He inspired a practice of early Christians giving each presents in his memory.

A practice which grew and grew.

And given the close proximity of his commemoration to the 25th, and with the growth of the availability of consumer goods, and our culture's turn to general indulgence but the indulgence of children especially, the two holidays just sort of "*collapsed*" into one-other.

So that the truth about each became obscured.

A perfect analogy of this, I think, is those Bollywood dancing-ladies (from India) who will stand behind each other so perfectly for a moment, waving their arms, that they seem to merge into a single multi-limbed creature: "a human octopus."

And it will serve us well, I think, to begin to tease these celebrations apart.

To "turn back the clock."

Why?

Firstly, because, as I know you'll agree if I pressed you, no one *actually* deserves to steal attention away from Christ, let alone *on His birthday*.

Friends, I'm going to be blunt: we're flirting with idolatry.

"How so?", you ask.

Well, in the Old Testament, in the early period, just prior to the (Joshuanic) Conquest and for some time afterward, the Amorite pagans who settled in Canaan would allow or deliberately plant small groves of (tall) trees on what the Bible calls, "the High Places" (in the Land).

And sometimes - perhaps on arid, windy summits where the trees wouldn't grow; where the soil was too shallow for good anchoring roots, they would erect artificial trees - made of wood or stone - like a totem pole - in their place; and you know these artificial trees from Scripture as "asherah poles."

And this is where the Amorites would worship and sacrifice.

Up, close to the "heavens."

Close to Baal and Molech and the other fictional demons they liked.

And because these sites were sacred, established, *popular* places to congregate, the Israelites - when they returned from their slavery in Egypt, were themselves drawn to them.

They even built altars to the Lord at those (*same*) sites.

But not just *next* to them, *in place* of them:

you see, they were directly commanded to do so through Moses:

in (the Book of) *Deuteronomy* we hear God *expressly* telling His people that: "You shall not" put my altar - and I quote - '*beside*' the Canaanites' cultic asherahs.

He told them that he 'hate[d]' when they did this: [16:21].

Accordingly, in (the Book of) *Exodus*, God commanded that the Israelites were to 'cut down their[- the Canaanites' -] Asherim' first: [34:13].

They didn't listen, of course.

One of King David's descendants - the dreadful King Manasseh - actually put an asherah *in* the Temple itself: [see 2 Kgs. 21].

Alongside the "Ark of the Covenant."

This was *heartbreaking* - for the one who made us and redeemed us.

What Manasseh did was traitorous.

And *we* must be careful about how we might cause a similar anguish to God and create confusion in our children.

But whether you accept that putting asherahs '*beside*' altars is analogous to the overwhelming, unavoidable prevalence of "Santa" at Christmas or not, I'll say what I said before again - let's keep it simple: no one deserves to steal attention away from Christ, let alone *on His birthday*.

Secondly, Bishop Nicholas - actual "Santa" - is a person worth reflecting about on his own merits.

And I did say, a few weeks ago, that I would be emphasising some of the heroes of

the faith in my preaching during Advent.

(I encouraged you to do some of your own research and reading about them.)

And Bishop Nicholas of Myra *was* a "hero";

a truly remarkable man irrespective of whether you accept the more outlandish, embellished tales:

He was, for example, we *know*, personally present at the (Ecumenical) Council of Nicaea where the Church ratified the Apostolic witness to Jesus as possessing *two* natures, one of them *fully* divine.

(This statement of agreement is the "Nicene Creed," which we'll be reciting in a moment.)

When a heretic - a charismatic, *renegade* preacher - called, "Arius," tried to dispute this clear fact, everywhere implied and even explicitly stated in the New Testament, Nicholas became so upset that he charged down onto the debating floor at the heart of the chamber, and hit Arius in the mouth to silence him.

The sympathy of the crowd was very much with him - indeed, likely a cheer went up from the other delegates.

But this conduct was...unbecoming of a clergyman.

And the Rome emperor Constantine who was chairing the discussions had Nicholas removed by soldiers, who forcibly shaved his beard and threw him in prison - for a period.

But it was Nicholas' indefatigable, *abundant* charity to children, impoverishing himself to help others, throwing gold down chimneys into socks drying over fires, travelling on foot (not on Rudolph) to bring alms to the poor, having saved money by not purchasing a horse, that led to the immortalization of his reputation.

And why did he do any of this?

Because he *loved* the one who loved us first.

Loves you most - more than any other:

'Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' [Mk. 1:1]

Will this be obvious to our neighbours this Christmas?

Will it be obvious in our families?

- That *Jesus* is the "reason for the season."

Indeed, He is the reason that there is anything at all!

John (chapter) 1, verse 3: 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.'

Let's do what we can, then, to keep the "spotlight" on the right leading-man.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, amen.

