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| **EUCHARIST - 2nd Sunday in Advent : 5th December 1999** |
|   | As one gets older so it becomes easier to fall into a pattern, life starts to follow a predictable course just like the seasons,  with summer following  spring, and autumn, summer. This is particularly true at this time of year, as we look forward to Christmas as our already busy lives threaten to get overloaded unless we rely on some standard formats to help us through.  At Christmas there are so many different aspects to prepare, cards to send to friends one hasn't written to for 12 months, cakes to be baked, services to plan, fairs to attend, decorations to fetch down from the loft, and then the fruitless search for replacement bulbs for the Christmas tree lights. This year, as the traditional pattern started to unfold, I came across this present once again. You may have one of these in your house, some people have a custom to put unwanted presents in a drawer, leaving them to next year when they give it away to somebody else. As you can see it is beautifully wrapped, someone took a lot of care over it. I am certain that the sender spent a lot of time considering what I really needed. I have received plenty of gifts from this source before and they have always been exactly what I required at the time. However strangely enough I have held back from opening this one, perhaps its my upbringing but I have always been a bit wary in case it turns out to be Pandora's box. I am not quite sure what I will find inside, and I am scared to find out. I've held it to my ear, tried to peep in, picked it up and shaken it a bit but it confounds my  senses of sight, smell, taste and hearing. And in the end I have decided that it is best left well alone but I have never been able to bring myself to give it away. Just holding it makes me uneasy so I'll put it down there while we think about the gospel reading. Have you ever considered the important role that the media plays in our lives ? Every day journalists located around the world report on events in their neighbourhood, forcing us to look outside our little world. Some events are earth shattering, even now many are still fascinated by the  assassination of President Kennedy, or can recall how they felt when they first heard that man had landed on the moon. Fifteen years the BBC brought the horrors of the dreadful famine in Ethiopia into our living rooms, moving many people to tears, and just 10 years ago the Berlin Wall came down, uniting people who had been physically separated for a generation. Over the past week the newspapers have reported on riots around Euston station, and then in Seattle at the WTO conference, the gory details from the trial of Harold Shipman, yet more revelations about the race to become Mayor of London (heaven help us there's 6 months to go before the election), the early polls in the US primaries,  and of course the historical moment in Ulster where the new assembly composed of people representing opinions from both sides of the sectarian divide, came together to form a government responsible for the affairs of the Province. It is difficult to read the news without taking sides, I found myself opposed to the people demonstrating at Euston, probably because they threatened to disrupt my travel schedule but strangely in sympathy with many of those protesting at the World Trade summit. If you have the time to read about the same "news" in different papers then you will notice how the  journalist's perspective "colours" the story. Sometimes items are treated with scant regard by one paper, whereas in another, several column inches are devoted to them.  This difference in approach is even more pronounced in the tabloids where attention grabbing headlines serve to highlight the stance taken. I think my favourite in terms of the blatant pandering to its readers is still "Gotcha" in the Sun the day after the General Belgrano was sunk in the Falklands war. The number of people killed was inconsequential compared to the jingoistic sentiment expressed in those 2 syllables which was both a reflection of and fanning the flames of latent imperialism which seemed to grip the British people at the time of the Falklands conflict.  Now one of the reasons why papers adopt different approaches is because their editors are appealing  to a different segments of the market. They know who "their" public are and so present stories accordingly. It used to be said that the Daily Telegraph is read by those people who think they run the country, the Guardian by those who want to run the country, the Express by those whose parents used to run the country, the Financial Times by those who actually run the country, and the Sun by those people who don't care less who runs the country provided they don't interfere with page 3. I enjoy reading the Times, particularly the lead writers and editorial page, and no doubt my opinions are shaped by the way that things are presented. Careful study of the Bible will reveal that the Gospel writers demonstrated a similar "bias" in favour of their target audience, even though the facts they reported were essentially the same. Consider the story of the Nativity. Matthew, writing to the Jews, is at great pains to stress the genealogy of Jesus stretching back to David, and ultimately Abraham. He devotes the first 17 verses of his first chapter describing Jesus' family tree, and then how Jesus' royal descent was acknowledged by the wise men who travelled from the East. This may not seem so important to us, but for some people the Bible came alive when they could see Jesus lineage. Luke, on the other hand, writing to the Greeks, records in great detail the miraculous birth of John, the appearance of the angel to Mary, her joyful response to the news of  her conception, the reasons for the journey to Bethlehem, and Jesus' birth in a lowly stable. Finally John emphasises Jesus' oneness with the Father, his role in Creation, and the reason he was born into the world. You see there are benefits in different approaches. In our gospel reading we heard how Mark, without time for these finer points, cuts straight to the chase. His opening sentence is "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of  God". For him Jesus' divinity is self evident, there is no need to spend time beating about the bush. Instead the account of Jesus starts with the ministry of John, effectively 30 years into Jesus' life, highlighting how John's role as the fore-runner, or messenger, heralded the arrival of the Messiah. Because his style is so concise, the story as told by Mark comes through with great clarity, the key points are not obscured by other details. It can't have been easy being John the Baptist, after all the prophets who preceded him had their own ministry, although their periods of prophecy may have overlapped, there was no "overt" rivalry. Whereas John's purpose was to point  people to Christ, he was the pathfinder, the advance guard who cut through the complexity of Judaism and showed people the way to salvation. On the face of it there was nothing particularly appealing about John, even in 1stcentury Palestine it was not normal for someone to wander around the desert wearing camel hair clothing and living off the land. Nor was his message attractive. Mark records that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. By and large people do not like to be confronted with the reality about their situation. Yet Jesus described him as the greatest man that had ever been born. Why was this ? Perhaps it was because he recognised his role and fulfilled it entirely. The people were hungry, they were searching for something which their "religion" couldn't provide and John with his simple direct message explained things  which they could not make sense of themselves. That is why people came from Jerusalem and the surrounding villages into the desert to hear him, to repent of their sins and to witness this publicly by being baptised. The water itself did not physically cleanse, recall this was the same river that the Syrian general Naaman was told to bathe in by Elisha to heal his leprosy. No baptism by immersion was a sign, a symbol that their old life was behind them, it had been put to death as people took a step of faith and were set free from their oppressive burdens and made right with God. This message that was taken up the early Christian Church. When Paul addressed the Athenians, a culture which worshipped many gods, he commanded them to repent and be baptised, in effect to change their mind in respect of sin, God and self. Repentance may be preceded by contrition, sorrow for what you have done, but sorrow is not in itself repentance. At the same time John was pointing people towards the Messiah, the person who could save them from their sinful nature and who would baptise them in the Holy Spirit. Were you aware of that before ? For John belief in Jesus automatically leads to baptism with the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost Peter addressing the crowd said"Repent and be baptized .... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"(Acts 2 vs. 38-39) The Holy Spirit is misunderstood, misrepresented and even maligned in many parts of the modern church. Yet Jesus is quite clear, the Spirit as part of the triune God is of equal importance to the Father (who we have not seen), and the Son, who men only saw briefly. The Spirit is the living presence of God on earth, who gives the Christian new life, and guides and helps the Church. The Spirit should live in us, God's people, in the same way that he appointed and equipped God's leaders in the past, inspired the prophets and acted in and through the early Christian Church. It is the Spirit which enables miraculous things to happen. Remember the apostle Philip was lead by the Spirit to meet the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, then all of a sudden Philip was taken to Azotus, a town many miles away.   Which brings me back to this present. Jesus indicated before he left that he would send the Holy Spirit who would act as a comforter, he would convict people of their sins, ultimately it is the Spirit who gives life (John Ch. 6 vs63). Paul is clear in his letter to the Romans  "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" Ch 8 vs. 9, an it is through the Spirit that we become part of the family of God. Perhaps my conservative, cautious nature leads me to be suspicious of the Holy Spirit, scared of what could happen if I were to let go. So the present lefts unopened, as I am fearful of what is inside, and as a result all suffer because the gifts of the Spirit are not for one persons benefit, no they are given for the common good. 1 Corinthians ch12 vs. 7-11. It is easy to explain my reluctance in "religious" language, I was always taught that it is important to test the fruit, so my restraint is prudent  but any gardener will tell you that a tree will not bear fruit if it is root bound.   The presence of God's Spirit is fundamental if we are to grow as Christians individually, and collectively. Spiritual growth is not necessarily  numerical, the number of people attending Church on a Sunday could remain unchanged, but if we are prepared to open the box and receive all that God has prepared for us then as a body of Christians we will grow together in love as we start to share the fruits of the Spirit in this fellowship. That would make this Christmas, the last one of the Millennium, one to remember.   **Simon de Bell** |  |