



November 2019

Volume VI ,Number 4

THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS

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The Season of Giving Thanks

By Fr. Donald Hughes
St. John's Anglican Church, Boerne, TX

As temperatures cool and daylight shortens we welcome the approaching holiday seasons. It is good to remember the saints who have gone before; it is good to give thanks and it is good to give gifts; and, all in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, this is the time of year that brings to a close everything that has gone before. It invites reflection back over the previous months and before long we are remembering turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie—Thanksgiving!

Over the years Thanksgiving has lost its position as a holiday for its own sake. Rather, it has morphed into a pre-season holiday: a Kick-off day for Christmas, eating, football, and planning for Black Friday. This is sad. To this point I offer a quote from something I read in times past, *“The art of giving thanks is one thing that separates man from the animals. To receive a gift and say, ‘Thank you,’ is one of the noblest things a man can do. There is nothing small or trivial about it. To say ‘thank you’ is to acknowledge that we have been given something we did not earn and do not deserve.”*

Happy is the man who understands that all of life is a gift of God and that life itself is the ultimate gift; which is why the Bible says, *“in everything give thanks.”* When we cannot do anything else, we can always be grateful. I have been told, *“If you can’t be thankful for what you have received, be thankful for what you have escaped.”*

Our prayer book has a collect and appointed readings for Thanksgiving Day. Why not incorporate these into our Thanksgiving plans and preparations? It begins with portions

taken from Psalm 147: *“Praise the Lord, for it is a good thing to sing praises unto God . . . who heals . . . who makes the grass grow for the use of men . . . who makes peace in their borders and fills them with the flour of wheat; a joyful and pleasant thing it is to be thankful.”*

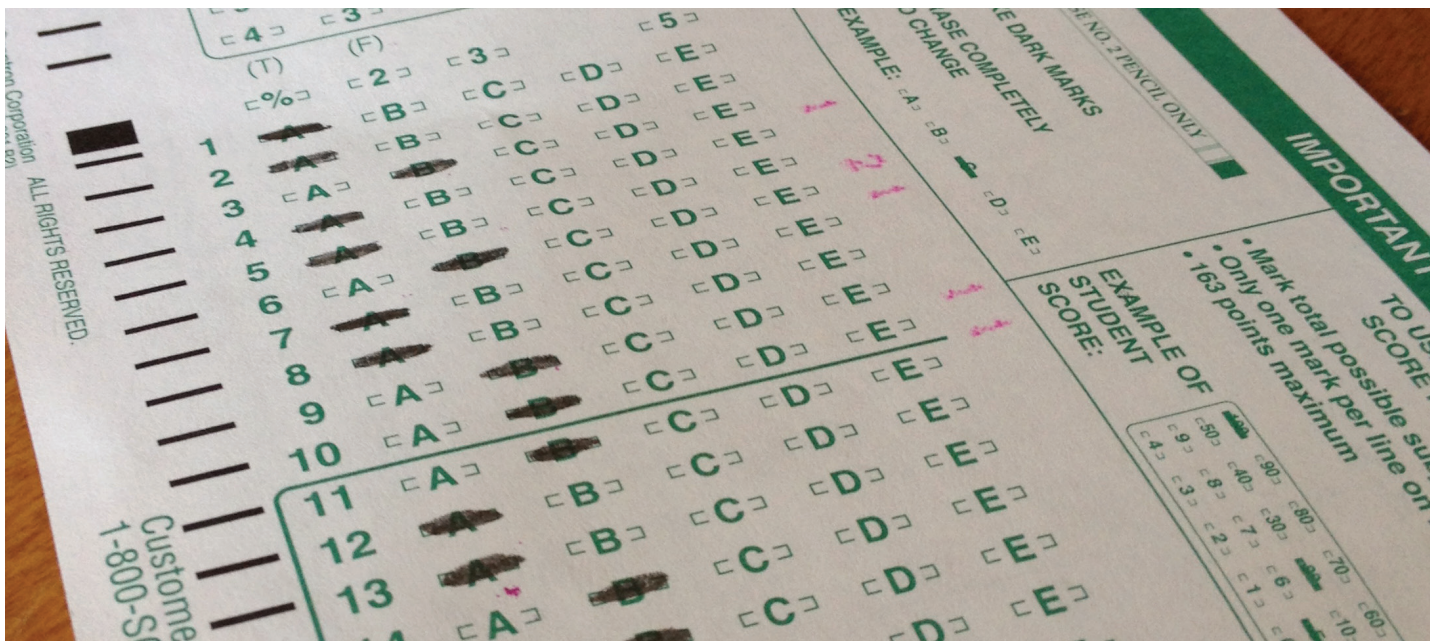
I am thinking that a Thanksgiving, celebrated for its own sake, will make for a more blessed Advent and Christmas season.

It is my prayer and hope for us all to have a mindful and purposeful Thanksgiving. A step in that direction is to remember that good food is only a symbol of the bounty we celebrate. While we prepare to set out tables and satisfy our stomachs with the blessing of good food and good drink, let us be mindful of the bounty of God’s grace and blessing in all its variety. Grateful hearts release us from the worry and anxiety that rob us of the blessing of the moment.

Take note that right on the heels of Thanksgiving is the start of another liturgical year. What better way to begin another rotation than with thankful hearts. And so it is my prayer, and hope as well, that we all have a mindful and purpose filled Thanksgiving.

*“All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all.”*

For these and more we give thanks.



By Vicar-General Fr. Michael Penfield

Presenting: Church ReVive

When I was a teacher, I taught in a very poor section of San Jose. About 98% of the students were on free or reduced priced meals. Well, during the Bush Junior years, a very famous program entitled “No Child Left Behind” was instituted. The program set goals for each year for what percentage of the school should be at or above the “proficient” level. If you did not meet that goal, you were an “underperforming” school. If you did not meet that goal for two years in a row, you went into the underperforming school program. We went into such a program.

When we entered this program, the state sent coaches, and we started a program which had the initials TASS. Our Principal was an amazing man. He insisted on an across-the-grades buy-in. And he got it. But many of the other schools that went into the underperforming school program did not have buy-in from the teachers. And the reason for this lack of buy-in is that TASS had one controversial requirement. TASS required that fellow teachers had to observe other teachers to see if they were instituting the programs as taught. This was called “calibrating”, and it was to be anonymous.

No teacher was to be disciplined for not instituting the program correctly. And none of these observations were to be part of the teacher’s formal evaluation. They were to merely provide statistical data to see how well, as a school, we were doing. However, many teachers hated this aspect.

Although many of our teachers did not like this aspect of TASS, we did it. Being one of the coaches I know that both the principal and all the coaches had to earn the teachers’ trust,

and once they saw how the data was being used, they were fine with it. Additionally, as a coach I can tell you that observing other teachers was incredibly helpful for me. I learned great techniques for teaching that I was able to incorporate. In fact, we discovered that, if we had the teachers become coaches who were NOT doing the program correctly, their observations made them much better teachers.

But many other schools did a poor job with this. Their principals used the data for their teachers’ yearly evaluations. This meant that the principals may not have really seen the teacher teach, but rather based their review on other teachers’ opinions. And this was not supposed to happen. Also, their coaches did not keep their information confidential. But, rather they spoke disparagingly of the teachers who were not doing a good job.

Because of our buy-in, because of our fidelity to the program, and because of the enthusiasm that developed among the staff, TASS proved for us a complete success. We got out of the status of an underperforming school and met our goals even though others schools did not. Additionally, we were the only school that praised the TASS program whereas other schools and other teachers condemned it.

The reason I bring up this program is that, in our Convocation of the West, we will be providing a program and its necessary support to help us in our mission to reach an unbelieving world. The program will be presented at our Annual Clericus at the Franciscan Retreat House in Mesilla, New Mexico. And the thrust of the program is to help our churches,

grow. The program is called “Church ReVive”, and Canon Mark Eldredge of the American Anglican Council will be teaching it.

The reason that I am excited about this particular program is that one of our churches has used it successfully. St. Michael and the Angels in Kerrville, Texas has gone from 18 on a Sunday before the program to 42 a Sunday after. And the clergy at St. Michael have raved about it.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, “This was Texas. That is not the same as [fill in your state]”. I agree, and I understand. After all, I was rector at Saint Luke’s in Los Altos Hills, California – the most beautiful, worst location for a church in the middle of the least religious state in the union. And I tried many things to help us grow. Some were successful; some



The Rev. Canon Mark Eldredge
Director of Church Revitalization and Coaching, The American Anglican Council

were not. But ultimately, I did it all on my own. I did it blind. There was no owner’s manual, but there was a ton of advice. Most advice was inapplicable. Some I could use. But ultimately it started wearing me down.

We have some very small churches that are serving a shrinking or stagnant congregational population – and that is fine. It is fine to be there for people who need us. But sooner or later we must choose between being a dynamic, growing church and being a museum church – i.e., a church that will preserve everything exactly as our parishioners remember it once was. No new people are sought; and no activities are planned to grow the church. And once these parishioners are gone, the building is sold and the parish ends.

But being a museum church does not fulfill the Great Commission. It does not help us to spread the Gospel. And it does not help us, as one beggar, to tell the other beggars where they can find the Bread of Life. Growing our churches is not only nice for our ASA; it is a requirement of all Christians. So, let us see if this program will help us to reach those who need to be fed.

But I also trust my rectors and clergy. I want you to come to the Clericus and evaluate this program objectively. If you

do not think it will work, then please let me know. No one will force you to do it. However, if you do want to try it, then I want you to understand that the Convocation is here to support you.

We have set aside funds to pay for Canon Eldredge to come to your church and help you and your parishioners.

But, this means that you must buy into the program. You have to implement the program as designed or as agreed upon by your parish and Canon Eldredge. If you and your church decide to do this with fidelity, then I am sure you will have good results.

However, before we can start, you must evaluate your church’s health and you must do this **BEFORE** the Clericus. I need each rector to go to the webpage churchrevive.org and complete your church’s evaluation. Now, I know how we all dread this type of work, but first, it must be done, and second, you have until February 14th to complete it! What a Saint Valentine’s Day gift.

In all seriousness, what we have – how we worship, what we believe, and how we live our faith – is precious. We should strive to preserve it beyond our lifetime. And the only way we can do this is to make sure our churches aren’t museums to the faith. They need to be living, growing communities. And for many of us, this is hard. It is not that we have not been trying. It has rather been that things have not worked as we had hoped or we had been promised. However, here we have an opportunity. I am hopeful it will be a good opportunity, but this is, of course, up to us. It must fit our parishes and then, if it does, it must be implemented. And with God’s blessing, and only with His blessing, we may turn our churches into something more. We may, by His will, become beacons of faith, and hope, and light, and sanctuaries for the faithful.

Amen.

About The Rev. Canon Mark Eldredge

Mark was born near Buffalo, NY but grew up in Palm Coast, FL. He received his Bachelor of Science from Florida State University and his Master of Divinity from Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA. After serving as an Associate Priest for three years at an Episcopal Church in Midland, TX, Mark moved to Jacksonville to be the Senior Pastor of Epiphany Episcopal Church. While leading that church through revitalization, he also moved the church into what has become the Anglican Church of North America. After 14 years in that church, Mark is now the Director of Church Revitalization for the American Anglican Council serving the Anglican Church in North America by helping local congregations better fulfill Great Commission in our times. He also serves a similar role as the Canon for Congregational Health for the Gulf Atlantic Diocese based in Jacksonville, FL. Mark is married to his best friend, Ame, has three children from 27 to 17, and one grandson.



Not Yet

By Bishop Winfield Mott

Sometimes the observance of Advent in church feels like play-acting. In re-enacting the drama of the Incarnation, we pretend that the Messiah has not yet arrived, that we still wait for the long-expected Jesus. The gradually increasing Advent candles and the doors of the Advent calendar help build the suspense.

But we know that it has already happened, that we are not really waiting for the Babe to arrive in Bethlehem. Knowing our history, especially our salvation history, is important, and re-enactments are a great way to teach and remind us, a way to experience the past. Yet leaving it there, viewing the play from the audience, or even as an acting participant, is to miss the mark of Advent. It is the story of how a longing people receive their Messiah. It is also a life-changing impact on you, anything but play-acting, because each generation is faced with receiving the Messiah as a personal choice, not simply a recalling of a great moment in history. It is the same distinction as between celebrating the Mass as only a historical remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection versus the Mass as the celebration and reception of Jesus among us personally, in real presence.

Arab Anglicans recently met in synod in Amman to consider the meaning of Christian sacrifice. In speaking to them, the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilus,

noted, "Humility and metanoia [i.e. repentance, turning your life around] are the key to salvation. The deeper we are shaped by humility and metanoia, the more available we are to God as those who can offer a sacrificial commitment and service to others." This captures the purpose of Advent. It starts with the message of John the Baptist, a calling to turn your life into a new orientation, a new meaning.

Advent unfolds the historical story of how God comes to save his people, including the preparation done by John the Baptist. Unfortunately, the way the story is told to us can immunize us against where it leads. The path takes us, led by the star, to eventually stand at the Nativity, sharing in the general jubilation and awe. But the path begins with confrontation. The Christmas celebration in our culture may be sweet and cozy. John the Baptist is anything but that. It is our shared tendency to skip over his part in things, and hurry up with the Christmas sentiment. Society's compulsion to start Christmas no later than Thanksgiving may be explained by a retail need for profit. But the Church's proclivity to have the "Christmas Pageant" and put up the decorations somewhere early in Advent can only be completely explained by a need to avoid thinking too much about the personal confrontation, on which John insists and which lies in the Advent message like an unexploded grenade.

Suppose John's preaching, incorporated as it is in canonical Scripture, is intended for all ages and not limited to some First Century folks in need of correction. What does it say to you? The Christian message today seems to divide. Some preachers proclaim doom and judgement, applying the Law, along with some added modern proscriptions, and denouncing all manner of bad things going on among us. Others tell us, in contrast, that God accepts everyone just as they are, with no amendment of life needed.

No wonder people are unclear on the Christian proclamation. Neither of these positions represents the Gospel. The Gospel is for sinners who repent. Metanoia is the bridge between Law and Gospel. "Just as I am, without

one plea" is not at all the same as "Just as I am, end of story." John fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah in preparing the way, making the paths straight for the Lord (see Luke 3:3-6). If that path leads to you, there is no detour around John. Advent, like Lent, is a season of preparation, an inner inventory of your life. Any realistic review, seen from God's perspective and his standards,

cannot help but lead to repentance. Even our repentance is imperfect, of course. But God doesn't grade us on that performance. The point is, when you understand the reality of your failure to be what you should be, to understand that you are "without one plea" except the sacrifice of the Cross. This process is called "confession and absolution," and we do it every week, because we need it at least every week. You cannot justify yourself to God. But God indeed accepts every sinner who will receive him. That is the message of the Gospel, and I wish fervently it would be the message of the Church. It is in understanding that the process rolled out by John the Baptist precedes necessarily the

celebration of Immanuel, God with us, that the meaning of Advent becomes clear. To celebrate our salvation before we have dealt with our failure and need for metanoia, is to hopelessly muddle what needs to happen.

But with that in mind, Advent can make sense. The very first Epistle of Advent (in the 1928 BCP and Year A of the Common Lectionary) keynotes the lifestyle: "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another, for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. The commandments... are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:8-9). As Patriarch Theophilus notes, humility and metanoia pave the straight road to the next step of sacrificial commitment and service to others. The

Incarnation is founded in kenosis, Christ sacrificial emptying of himself of his glory to enter our species in abject humility. That is, as it were, his Advent preparation.

As we grow to understand the perspective of God towards us, poor, sinful creatures, humility on our part should not be hard to achieve. We are indeed without one plea. But through the sacrificial victory of the Cross, we

who are lost in sin are made whole, restored and given time for amendment of life. We are made debt-free, says Paul, and owe no one anything except to love. We are not very good at loving, either. But with humility and ever-ready repentance, we can respond to the sacrificial love of Christ by our own commitment to him and in service to others. Our Advent preparation is complete at that point and we are ready to begin once again to walk the road of love, which has come down at Christmas.



THE CLOSING VIEW

Photo by Jenny Caywood



Clericus 2020

The Anglican Convocation of the West will be holding their annual Clericus in Mesilla, New Mexico, February 18, 19 and 20. We are providing this early notice because, originally, we discussed holding the Clericus this October in order not to interfere with the Diocesan Synod. However, a lot of the clergy found this too difficult and our guest speaker could not be with us then.

Our guest speaker will be the Reverend Canon Mark Eldredge. Canon Eldredge will be speaking on church revitalization. We will have more information for you on this later.

Synod 2020

The Missionary Diocese of All Saints will be holding their 2020 Synod in Ocean City, Maryland March 26, 27 and 28. This is an extremely important Synod. We will be electing a new Bishop Coadjutor who will be leading MDAS after Bishop Ilgenfritz retires. Therefore, we need to see as many as you as we can!

Additionally, the Anglican Convocation of the West will be holding their Meeting of the Convocation at the same time and the same location. Our meeting will be the morning of March 26. This means that those members of the Convocation who will be attending need to arrive by the evening of March 25.

We hope to see you all there!