

The Anglican Province of Christ the King Diocese of the Western States

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An Advent Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of the Western States

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On November 27th, Advent Sunday, Father Chad Hart III was instituted as Rector of the Parish of Saint Mark in Portland in the presence of a full church. It was a glorious day and a glorious service! But whenever our large parishes experience success (and Saint Mark's truly deserved that day!), I think of our small and struggling parishes. Saint Mark's went through some terrible times and we rejoice for their parish family. The parish persevered; the Fire Brigade supplied clergy; we all worked to save a parish. *Laus Domini!* Their success is our success and I want us to use this Advent 2022 to call to remembrance who we are and what our calling is.

We must understand that we are doing God's work. Ours is not to collect the most dollars or build the most spectacular edifices or draw the largest congregations, unless we work in the vineyard together to build Christ's Kingdom. We are not independent contractors! Large and small parishes; rich and poor parishes all work for a common cause (as Bishop Morse said): to bring souls to Christ. To paraphrase Henri Nouwen, we must struggle to avoid the temptation to be relevant or to be spectacular or to be powerful. We will be judged by every life we touch; every soul we save. Our calling is to spread the Kingdom. Building new churches, attracting new parishioners, and giving for the physical welfare of others are all good, but to show our neighbors the love of God by what they see in us, to teach them what the Incarnation truly means, and to illuminate the darkness with the Light of Christ, these are our first priorities.

And our priorities are no better illustrated than in the Advent Wreath and its candles. Each candle represents one week leading up the Christmas and there many interpretations. The one I like best is that the first candle represents the Patriarchs (the Fathers of the Hebrews – and us), the second represents the Prophets (those inspired men who spoke to us by the Holy Ghost), the third John the Baptist (the forerunner who paved the way for the Messiah), the fourth Mary (the great Mother of God, the greatest of the Saints and our example of obedience); and a center candle for the Baby Lord Jesus (Who came to save us from ourselves). I like this symbolism not only because it emphasizes God touching the human experience down through time but also because it explains our reason for being in this darkened world that so desperately needs the Light of Christ.

Every Advent in my preparation for Christmas, I reread Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. We know the plot, how a miser and unloving man is shown present, past and future; and how he mends his ways by learning to love his neighbor as himself. How appropriate during Advent that this novel teaches us that true relevance in this life has nothing to do with material success or the gospel of Mammon. Every one of our parishes is important – even the smallest – because we prepare our folks to meet our Infant Saviour. Tiny Tim shows the way, when he tells his father that he hoped that when people saw him, a cripple in church on Christmas Day, it would be pleasant for them to remember just Who made lame beggars walk and blind people see. Advent and Christmas; you can't have one without the other! So God bless us, God bless us every one!

Your brother in Christ,

+ Donald M. Ashman