

Anticipating the Reign of Christ – Advent 2010

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

December 19, 2010

Isaiah 60:1-9 & Rev 7:1-12
(Hymns – 115, 119, 122, 146)

My fondest early memories of Christmas
have a lot to do with eating.

I grew up in Niagara Falls.
My dad worked for a bank,
and in those days there were strict laws
on how many hours and days the banks had to be open.

On Christmas Eve,
they had to stay open regular hours,
so they closed at 3:00PM and it was usually around 5:00PM
when dad got home, depending on how long it took them to balance.
Then we'd pack up the car and head to my grandmother's
in a town called Georgetown,
just north and west of Toronto.

It took about an hour and a half or two hours,
depending on whether the Burlington bride was up or down.
We got off the Queen Elizabeth Highway at Bronte
and wended our way up county roads to Georgetown.
We passed through small hamlets and past farms all the way.
There was usually snow on the ground.

I remember the sense of warmth
in watching the lights in the windows of the houses we passed.

Then we would arrive at Nana's
and that warmth would actually envelope me.
Nana cooked on a wood-burning stove.

It would have been on all day,
so the dining room, where you came into her house,
being right next to the kitchen,
was filled with the warm smells
of whatever Nana had lovingly prepared for dinner.

The next day, the warmth and loving preparation continued,
with breakfast after presents, then Christmas dinner at noon.

So, my fondest early memories of Christmas have a lot to do with eating.

And that eating was surrounded by warmth and light,
coming into that warm dining room,
being warmly welcomed by my grandmother,
marvelling afresh at her Christmas lights,
and being fed at the brightly lit table ready for our arrival.

Our Scripture passages this morning
deal with people being drawn to the light and warmth of Christ's presence.
Great throngs are coming to dinner
from all the nations of the earth,
invited and drawn into God's presence
by the grace and truth they see in Jesus Christ.

And we have been called by God to be their hosts,
to lovingly prepare for them a place of light, and warmth, and nourishment.
We have been given the privilege
of nourishing their souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

We don't know who all will walk through that door today,
or what workings of the Holy Spirit has prompted them to do that,
or what impact our warm welcome will have on their lives.

But we do know how God wants us to welcome them,
whether they are here for the first time or come back week after week.
God wants us to shine in welcoming them home.
Jesus Christ wants to be in us as we joyfully greet the nations.
The Holy Spirit wants us to tell them the good news of what God has done.

That's what we will do over this Christmas week.
We have no idea who, in addition to the faithful regulars,
will walk through that door directly into Christ's sanctuary.
We can only prepare to welcome them with grace and feed them with faith.
The songs we sing, the prayers we offer,
the passages from the stories and the wisdom of the Scriptures we read,
the reflections on its meanings for us that we generate,
all carefully prepared as a feast of faith for those coming to dinner.

I've been thinking this week about what it takes
to host a good dinner party.
There is the planning for the evening,
the pains taken to create the proper environment,
the attention given to making the guests feel warmly welcomed,
the care in the selection and preparation of the food,
the setting of the table and the arrangement of the seating.

Then there is the actual arrival of the guests,
paying attention making them comfortable,
initiating congenial and caring conversations,
ensuring no one is left out of the introductions,
moving things along throughout the evening with humour and optimism,
tending to the needs of everyone
so they can enjoy the dinner thoroughly
and be at their best.

In the church, it is important to remember that the real host is Jesus Christ.
He is calling a countless crowd to come home to dinner.
He has invited us to help him in preparing for that homecoming
in small intimate communities like this one
around the world.

We've been extending the invitation for several weeks now.
We've posted notices, handed out flyers,
put our post cards into letter boxes
throughout this neighbourhood.

Who knows who the Spirit will move to come and see this Christmas?
What we do know is that we can pay attention
to the warmth of the welcome they receive
and the nourishment we offer them to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

The other profound truth that came to me afresh this week
was how much joy and delight my grandmother experienced
in hosting us when we visited.
While all her preparations and attention while we were there blessed us,
our presence blessed her and enabled her to use her gifts
in warm and loving ways.

So there is this wonderful reciprocity and mutual benefit
in the kind of hospitality we've been discussing this morning.
All the effort we put into making this homecoming a blessing to others
is a blessing to us as well.

As I have said, I have no idea who will walk through that door this week.
What I do know is that they will be warmly welcomed
by the remarkable warmth of the people of Brentwood Presbyterian
and experience the remarkable light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.