

Christmas Eve
2012

24 December

Merry Christmas everyone!

The good news is - the Mayans were wrong!

The bad news is - I had a lot of catching up to do with Christmas shopping!

In all honesty, though, those of you who receive the monthly newsletter, might remember that I talked about the Mayans in the December newsletter. Basically, what I said was that from what I had heard about the Mayan prophecy, they did not have in mind so much the *end* of the world, as the *beginning* of a new era in world history.

What I left out of the newsletter account was that I first heard of the Mayan prophecy way back in the 1990s. My fondest wish back then was to live long enough to see the end of the old era and the beginning of a new era. What I specifically had in mind was the hope that maybe, just maybe, Christ would finally come back and set the world back on the right course.

And with December 21st happening so close to Christmas - so close to our memorial of Christ's birth and promised return - it seemed like it just had to happen.

But it doesn't seem as though it has. At least, not yet.

In fact, I have to think maybe we've been taking many steps backward.

Maybe it's just that I watch all the wrong news.

Maybe it's just that I talk to all the wrong people.

But, I cannot help but see that people have become even more entrenched in their own personal beliefs. People have become even more resistant to compromise and reconciliation. People aren't the least bit interested in even listening to their neighbors, let alone actually loving them.

It seems the only thing most folks can agree on is that the world is headed in the wrong direction. The funny, strange and tragic thing is that they *only* think the world is headed in the wrong direction *because* they see the world headed in their opponent's direction.

Everyone fears their enemy has the upper hand.

So much of what's going on in the world is the direct result of people being ruled by fear.

Now, I have to say, my first version of this sermon ended up sounding a lot like John the Baptist. My initial reflection on the extent to which fear has invaded our families, our churches, our nation, my initial reflection sounded a lot like John just telling people to repent - to repent and return to faithfulness in the Lord.

I'd like to think that first draft was really just an attempt to offer perspective. In actuality, a lot of it was an expression of frustration.

It's frustrating to see so much of what goes on - in the parishes, in the communities, in the nation - to see so many people being ruled by fear.

Well, my job isn't just a matter of offering proper perspective on the things going on around us. My job is also to help teach and strengthen you in seeing the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world around us.

So, I found myself praying about how to combat the fear that is threatening to overtake us.

In prayer I was reminded of a place and time when fear is not present. That is, my mind was turned to thinking about Communion.

When we share Communion, when the Eucharistic Prayer is said, there is no fear present.

Now, that, in and of itself is an amazing thing. We're told that Communion was first instituted on the night before Jesus was handed over to suffering and death. Surely, Jesus and all the disciples had some sense of just how dangerous Jerusalem had become. Surely, they had every reason to have some foreboding of fear. And yet, as we remember that evening when we share Communion, there is no hint of fear.

But, as I thought more about Communion, an image came to my mind. I began to imagine what Communion would look like if it became infected with the fear that is running so rampant. Specifically, I began to think about the chalice.

Now, I know at least a few folks don't drink from the cup out of fear of catching a cold or flu or something.

But, I can't help but wonder at what an amazing and beautiful thing it is that we Anglicans share a common cup. To my mind, it is a shining example of what communion is all about.

But, what I would like you to imagine for a moment is what it would be like if the chalice bearer was filled with fear.

It's not such an outlandish and far-fetched idea. If we allow the fear that is all around us to continue to infect our congregations, to infect our faith, then it's really just a matter of time before those who serve you at communion become victims of fear as well.

But, imagine for a moment what it would be like for the chalice bearer to be filled with fear.

Lots of different possibilities suggest themselves - a nervous hand shaking as it puts the cup near you. Ultimately, perhaps, a refusal to even offer the cup. Imagine as the people drink from the cup the wine gets lower and lower until finally the chalice bearer can't stand it any longer and refuses to offer any more out of fear of running out.

Well, the consecrated wine may very well run out. The chalice may from time to time be emptied. But you know what? We can always find more.

We can always find more wine. Consecrate more wine. We can continue to share the cup.

But, consider this image. Consider a chalice bearer stronger than most folks. Consider a chalice bearer strong enough to crush the chalice. As fear grows, tension grows. As tension grows, our hands squeeze tightly into fists.

Now consider that the chalice is just a metaphor for your heart. The cup of salvation is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. It is poured out for every one of you so that your hearts may be filled with hope and joy and love. It is poured out just so that you don't have to live in fear.

And the fact of the matter is that you are strong enough to crush the chalice of your heart. If you become so fearful that you hold tightly to the forgiveness that you have been offered, the love and forgiveness that you have been offered, you are given a precious cup filled with salvation.

Are you going to be so filled with fear that you crush the cup, crush your own heart from the weight of fear?

Are you going to be so filled with fear that you can only shake and

shiver as you haltingly offer it to others?

Or are you going to be filled with confidence and freely offer your cup of salvation to a world that so desperately needs it?

I'd like to finish with a simple observation. With so many of the bad things happening all around us, so many people are tossing out solution after solution. Usually they're competing solutions and usually the only thing that gets accomplished is more conflict, more division, more misunderstanding.

I would like to humbly suggest that there is one solution. There is one thing that might possibly repair the fear and conflict and division. If we do this one thing well, we can begin to heal the world around us. I have to believe that if we faithfully share in Communion, if we let our bodies be filled with the bread of heaven and our hearts to be filled with the cup of salvation, *and if we take that into the world*, we will beat back the specter of fear.

When we remember Christmas morning, we remember when a new light came into the world - a world filled with darkness. This Christmas we can't help but remember that darkness still threatens. Communion is a light - a light which beats back the darkness of conflict, division and misunderstanding. It's a light this world needs, which we the people who have to live in this world, need now more than ever. Amen.