

Marg Nicoll Red Waratah



CHURCH OF ALL NATIONS
Advent Reflections
2008

Foreword

This booklet is the result of a suggestion made at an Elders' meeting earlier this year. Members of the congregation were invited to think and respond to such questions as;

- when has God seemed most real to you?
- how have you experienced moments of transcendence?
- where do you see God revealed?

The invitation was issued in the hope that, by listening to each other's stories, we would be enriched and encouraged in our individual and corporate journeys of faith.

As you read through these contributions we hope you will find some points of recognition, some stirring of your spirit, some renewed awareness of the great variety of ways in which we are encountered by the living God whom we have met in Jesus Christ, the one whose coming we particularly recall at this time of Advent. We encourage you to resist reading these contributions in one sitting. Take two or three days to contemplate each one.

We express our gratitude to all those who have contributed to this booklet. They include, Anon, Olivia Ball, Greta Bird, Ian Bird, Wes Campbell, John Evans, Lyn Fry, Ian Fry, Jeff Jackson, Pam Kerr, Sue Clarkson, Katie Evans, Gordon and Kathleen McGregor, Mac Nicoll, Margaret Nicoll, Don Smith and Sid Westwick.

Jeff Jackson and Mac Nicoll

God of the Interruptions

John Evans

I, like most people, live a busy life. It would seem it has to be that way these days. There is so much to attend to: family, neighbours, church things, community involvement and so on. Life becomes very organised, and controlled by our diaries.

Within such a life, I find God breaks in through the interruptions – if I let them happen. This may be just the passing conversation at church or someone in our community service work, a random knock at the front door – or that surprise phone call or unexpected letter or email. Sometimes it can be a stranger in the street, or in the queue at the bank or checkout.

If I don't allow the interruptions I find, I am just in control. I might set aside the quiet time, the time to reflect and pray – but it again can be me in control.



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The interruption, especially the unexpected interruption, can surprise – and literally can be heaven sent. They tend not to be a nuisance, but a blessing.

For me this year it was a letter I received from a prisoner. He literally had just randomly chosen our address from a great long list of churches. He wrote to quite a few, and apparently not many replied. I did, however. This all led to a long, and often deep correspondence about life and the Christian faith. It eventually led me driving to the Fulham Correctional Centre near Sale for this prisoner's baptism. It truly has been a remarkable interruption!

I guess the incarnation and the coming of Jesus, Christ's advent, has also been an interruption for the world. . . and what an interruption that has been!

Marg Nicoll Late Afternoon Stroll



Hope *Wes Campbell*

Advent focuses on Christian hope; and I am pleased that Advent looks toward the renewing of the whole creation. There I find that the future of Jesus Christ and the future of the whole creation are inseparably linked. For that reason I have learned to hold the resurrection of Jesus together with the resurrection of the dead.

Whatever Christian hope is, it is bound to the resurrection of Jesus who was crucified. He is the focus for hope which opens up the future toward life – both humanity’s future and that of the whole planet: the two are intertwined.



‘Do not put your trust in princes,’ says the psalmist. There I see an absolute contrast- either hope in ‘princes’ or hope in ‘Jesus Christ’. This year we have arrived at the 90th anniversary of the World War I, and commemorations seem to be developing into military celebrations, rather than the sombre and solemn remembrance of the conviction that this war must be the ‘war to end all wars’. Given the experience of the century that has followed, Christian hope can be nothing other than a full-hearted resistance to war, with the connected commitment to learn new and imaginative ways of resolving conflict and reconciling enemies.

Such is Advent hope.

God's Presence *Lyn Fry*

Occasions when I have been strongly aware of God's presence are varied and I am grateful to the Christians in my life who have provided these opportunities. The times are during close discussions at retreats, during rousing church services, after a word of prayer from my minister, words and stirring music of hymns, solitary moments of wonder at a mountain top or ocean vista, the cry of a tiny baby. All these have been special to me.



Lyn Fry

Some CAN members in a discussion at a weekend retreat at Anglesea some years ago.

A View of God's Presence in the World Today *Ian Fry*

The problem with inviting Christians to express a way in which they see God in our world today is that God is beyond human comprehension, and the way in which the Church has sought to define God confines an appreciation of God within the limits of linguistic expressions for existence, authority, capacity, creativeness and responses, and encourages the belief or expectation that the Divine Presence will be experienced only through direct intervention and at the level of one-to-one relationships.

Our contemplation of God is more fruitful if we base it on consideration of all aspects of revelation through the totality of the Holy Books and evidence of God's absolute unaided creativity and authority that is available to us in the physical presence of all that exists, in humanity's God-given capacity to assess, understand and work with all that exists, and interaction between the totality of things created, whether animate or inanimate, material or apparently immaterial.

On that basis I see God's presence in the progressive

demonstration of God's Universal Covenant with all of created life, complemented by the Divine Covenants recognised by each of the world's faiths.

Those covenants are being brought into stark relief by the changing relationships between the long-dominant Western World and the Non-Western



World which have been triggered by failure to adhere to obligations under covenant by the powers of the West, and given effect by human interaction. Greed, oppression and exploitation are not consistent with obligations under covenant. Divine Judgement is being imposed and the associated penal clause is being given effect by the trauma of decline within the Western World.

Thus, in my view, God's Universal Covenant and love for all humanity is being demonstrated by progressive improvement in the status of the people of the Non-Western World, and the inhibition of hegemonic power and the capacity of the dominant power(s) to impose partial or complete self-destruction.

Impostor Syndrome *Olivia Ball*

Sometimes I suffer from ‘impostor syndrome.’ How can I call myself Christian when I have so little faith? And yet the little I have is tenacious and won’t let go of me.

It seems Jesus was forever talking to ‘ye of little faith.’ He reassures me with these words: *“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”* Matt 17:20

With that comes responsibility. This verse was a favourite of my grandfather’s (for a long time I thought it was of his own invention, but true to form, he was quoting a parable): *“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”* Luke 12:48

Finally, when I am feeling overwhelmed or downhearted by the enormity of all that’s wrong with the world, I cling to John: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* John 1:5



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Wedding Quilt Pam Kerr



Pam Kerr

As I worked on this wedding quilt, apart from it being so obviously in the violet tones of the Advent season, the pattern of light emerging from the darkness spoke to me of the many times we catch glimmers of hope in the dark situations. At the time of making, I was involved in the Bethel Centre's move to new premises. Bethel offers the hope of healing to people who have been hurt or abused by the church, so the quilt also spoke to me of the Centre as a sign of hope.

Christmas Lunch *Sue Clarkson*

My mother, Lynette, died three days before Christmas. Friends and family travelled from interstate for the funeral and what with the rush and busy-ness of the festive season this meant we waited until 30th December to gather and honor her life. The intervening eight days were, to say the least, a little surreal for my family and me.

The eighteen months preceding this had been a roller coaster ride as we came to terms with the diagnosis of a brain tumor and then lived, as all those living with cancer do, with the joys of good news and the despair of 'setbacks'. We were told early that Mum's type of brain tumor did not have a great prognosis - a couple of weeks if she had no surgery, a few years if she was lucky, 18 months the average. It turns out, in this, she was very average.

I found my parents to be amazing throughout this ordeal, both in their unfailing faith in God and the extraordinary strength of their relationship. At times I found myself unable to even pray, yet my mother never seemed to sway from her sure knowledge that she was loved, despite all she was going through, by the God she worshipped.

The Christmas my mother died we were to gather as a family for dinner. Lunch was a low key affair, just my father, Brian and myself as my brothers were at their partners families. I didn't have high expectations –

probably a toasted sandwich and some escapist Christmas Day television viewing.

I arrived to pick up Brian for church to have him tell me that he hoped it was okay, but he'd invited Bob for lunch. There was a name I hadn't heard for years. We'd grown up with 'Big Bob' occasionally coming for lunch or attending family celebrations. He was someone Dad had met through Wesley Central Mission when we'd been part of the congregation there. Bob was now living in a housing commission flat in the suburbs and selling The Big Issue in town. I was at first surprised that Dad had decided this was the year to invite someone for lunch – but then realised that this was exactly the way Brian would cope this time – by thinking of the needs of others, not just his own suffering. That's the kind of fellow he is.

My low expectations for this meal changed with Bob's presence. We had a great three course lunch - cobbled together from the various soups, casseroles and desserts



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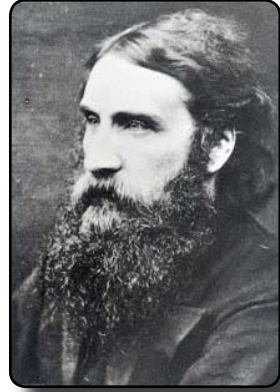
that people from the church had dropped in over the previous few days. And whilst strange, unexpected and not at all what I had planned, without a doubt Christ was present and very real to me at that lunch.

A Surge of Joy and Surprise

Mac Nicoll

George MacDonald was a poet and novelist in the nineteenth century. C.S. Lewis acknowledges his debt to MacDonald in his beautifully titled autobiography *Surprised By Joy*.

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Some years ago I was looking through the Advent section of our hymn book and I came across this poem by MacDonald. I can still recall how, after reading the fairly conventional first verse, I was struck by a surge of joy and surprise with the wonderful affirmation of the second verse.

He who by a mother's love
made the wandering world his own
every year comes from above,
comes the parted to atone,
binding earth to the Father's throne,
binding earth to the Father's throne.

But thou comest every day.
No, thou never didst depart,
never hour has been away.
Always with us Lord thou art,
always with us Lord thou art,
binding, binding heart to heart.

Bound Together *Jeff Jackson*



Jeff Jackson

I like to drive along the old Olympic Hwy when travelling to Sydney. The forgotten towns and windy roads often reveal a surprise. Just outside of Cootamundra stand these two trees. I call them the twin trees. They draw me back again and again. I'm not sure why, but they stir questions within me.

Perhaps they whisper of a relationship, two trunks bending and growing, year after year, in perfect symmetry, never touching but conscious of each other's presence. Perhaps it is a picture of God and me, turning and twisting together, a lifetime dance, never fully knowing each other yet connected and sustained by the other.

Magnificence of God *Ian Bird*

I see the magnificence of God revealed in nature. Almost 50 years ago I was fortunate enough to be among the first to see the Lambert Glacier from far inland on the Antarctic Ice-Cap. The memory still profoundly impacts me.



Ian Bird

Looking north along the 600km Lambert Glacier (World's largest glacier)

Finance Follows Faith *Don Smith*

In the early 1980s I was Treasurer of one of the major family welfare programs of the Church. The program had entered into a construction program involving the development of four residential family homes for participants in the program at a total cost of approximately \$1.1million.

The development had proceeded smoothly in the early stages and we were on budget for a successful conclusion. Unfortunately, the weather determined to create considerable difficulties in keeping the development on line and on time with a consequent impact on the financial outcome.

Towards the end of the development we became aware that our funds available would not be sufficient to complete it and it was determined that we should put a hold on the development to enable us to ascertain the most appropriate course of action.

After a short period reviewing the situation it was decided to proceed to complete the development despite the fact that the ultimate funding was 'in the air'. A faith decision.

The development was completed approximately six weeks later without us having resolved the funding situation

for the last \$200,000 of costs. Two weeks later we were informed that the Church had received the proceeds from a bequest to the program totalling in excess of \$200,000 which we believe justified our faith in completing the development without knowing the financial outcome with complete certainty.



Marg Nicoll / Alice's Bookshop

Central Australia *Pam Kerr*



Where the sense of Spirit is very strong: in the rugged mountains, the vast spaces and the myriad colours.

A Moment of Transcendence

Kathleen and Gordon McGregor

It was a wonderful recital on a grand organ by a very talented organist, interpreting the deeply heart-moving works of J.S Bach.

With the beautiful melodies ringing in our ears, we moved out of church at Glenelg to a crystal clear starlit Adelaide

Marg Nicol Williamstown at Night



night. It was a short walk to the beach and the waters of Gulf St.Vincent. There we paused while enjoying the beauty of the night and we felt the deep reassuring presence of God.

That was nearly 70 years ago, but the memory keeps returning and strengthening our faith in God. It was a challenging scene, and a strong force in my call to serve God in the ministry.

In Strange Ways *Sid Westwick*

“Sidney, I think it’s God who is meeting you in all this,” said Sister Michelle, the Catholic sister I met when I was working on the Windsor Housing Estate in the late 1980’s .

I didn’t believe her.

I was in a mess, still reeling from a failed business, a broken marriage, separated from my children and after months of living it tough on the streets and sleeping out.....a long way from the successful man who had started working life as a pastry cook and built up some strong and thriving businesses in western Victoria.

Fancy talking about God in the middle of all that!

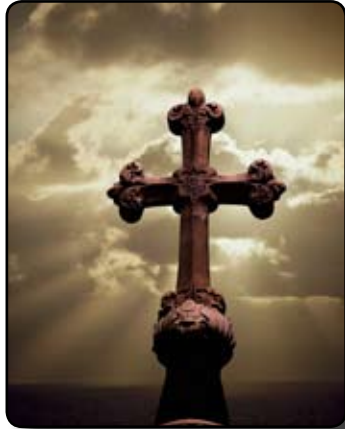
Twenty years later, I think she was right.

I found working on that estate, plunged into contact with local community and church groups, that I was good at doing repairs, sorting out problems, helping people get back on their feet.

One thing lead to another and I was on a new journey, organising functions for the city Church of St.Francis, using

my business background to run big occasions like Christmas dinners, for hundreds of people and building strong friendships with some marvellous people like Peter Collins and Sister Virginia who actually trusted me and gave me a sense of being O.K. despite my bad times and despite the fact that I now had acquired H.I.V.

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Twenty years later, my journey continues, I have a great partner who encourages me and whom I care for deeply. Together we have found a new life here in Carlton. I get a lot of satisfaction from helping to support people on the estate and from looking after the garden and grounds around the church. People like old Jack, who used to do the garden here, and Ailsa and the other staff have helped us to see we are valued and we now have a deep sense of fulfilment in our lives.

“Sidney, it’s God who is meeting you in all these troubles,” said that guardian angel, Sister Michelle.

She was right.

'Doing Good'

Katie Evans

I have been thinking about where I see God revealed and I think back to Maryborough where Mum or Dad would read passages of the Bible to me before I went to bed. My favourite was Luke 6:27-36. I



Katie Evans

used to read it over and over as it really seemed to hit home. *Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.*

I see God revealed when I see people carrying out their lives as the passage says, *love your enemies and do good to them ... for he who is good to the ungrateful and the wicked.*

When I was in Arnhemland in August I met people who were doing just that, 'doing good' where in most cases others would have just not bothered. My most memorable time was sitting around a camp fire talking with the old



Katie Evans

fellas about life in North Queensland. The nature and stories of these men had a profound impact on me, one which I struggle to explain.

God's Yes to Life *Greta Bird*

I most certainly experience God in life's innumerable joys, in the excitement of being in this world that is so magical. Even more, desperately, I experience God in the fathomless grief which is intricate to life - separation and death.

I experience God most profoundly in the 'dark hour of the soul', in the absence of God, in the image that Jesus gives us of God who suffers with us in our pain, who is



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not over against it, who has not caused it, but who has companioned us, and is joining us in what we experience. I think the ultimate hope is in the context of human mortality, to know that God's yes to life is to be the final word. That the last word to be uttered is to be a resounding yes to all that is good and life-giving.

A favourite illustration is Psalm 69, which begins with the desperate "I'm sinking, my God, mud is sucking me down" and ends as a song of praise. Many permutations and



changes occur in the prayer, which show God with the person praying. It gives a sense that when we pray, we enter into God's prayer. We pray to God

and with God, and through God, who is the source of all life.

The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins illustrates the experience of God in a sense of excitement and gratitude, of being in this exquisite world (especially in Advent):

The Starlight Night

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!
Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.
Buy then! bid then! – What? Prayer, patience, alms, vows.
Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!
Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow shallows!
These are indeed the barn; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows.

An Advent Prayer

Mac Nicoll

O, elusive and surprising God,
you confound our categories,
you disturb our dogmas,
you subvert our systems.
Help us in these Advent days
to be open and attentive,
aware of your presence in the world.
In our reading and our writing,
in our painting and our printing,
in kitchen and in coffee shop,
in company and solitude,
with friend and stranger,
keep us mindful and expectant
and open to encountering you
in all the experiences of life.





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