

***ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS AT  
ST. HELENA'S ANGLICAN CHURCH:***

**8<sup>th</sup> December**

**Christmas Fair** from 4 - 7.30pm with  
**Christingle** at 6pm

**19<sup>th</sup> December**

**Ladies' Carol Service** at 10am

**22<sup>nd</sup> December**

**Nine Lessons and Carols** at 6.30pm

**24<sup>th</sup> December**

**Crib Service and Holy Eucharist** at  
6.30pm

**25<sup>th</sup> December**

**Christmas Day Eucharist** at 10am



St Helena's Anglican Church Larnaca

Pastoral Letter

Christmas 2013

Dear Friends,

Religious festivals are an important and very public way of describing who we are. That is true of all religions. When children in multi-faith contexts are taught about the world's great religions, it is usual to start by describing to them the festivals that different communities hold. And of course if those festivals can be seen and experienced, so much the better. At times of festival there are symbols to play with and a story to tell.

This year there has been a lot of media coverage about the coincidence of the Jewish festival of Hannukah, and the US festival called Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is in essence a Christian festival, remembering the birth of the modern American nation and its establishment against all the odds. Those early settlers attributed their success to God's providence and that is what modern Americans continue to give thanks for. It is a time to reflect on who they are, where they've come from and what is their special character as a people.

The festival of Hannukah also derives from a story about victory against the odds. This is the story of how a group of Jewish activists engaged in successful rebellion against a corrupt occupying ruler called Antiochus Epiphanes. He had rubbished the Jewish religion, erected statues of Greek gods in the Temple and ordered pigs to be sacrificed there. These were outward signs of an attempt to outlaw Judaism altogether.

Judas the Hammer was the great Jewish hero who overcame this evil, cleansed the temple and organised a rededication of the temple and the Jewish people. It is easy to see why this festival holds important codes about Jewish national and religious identity. It represents the victory of the few against the many, and of purity against impurity. All of this is symbolised in the lighting of menorah candles and the playing of games and giving of gifts. In North America in particular it has come to parallel the Christian Christmas in that way.

So how do we present ourselves to the world and to those who want to know more about us at Christmas? How much sense do our symbols make, and how is our story told? How contemporary does it feel? For myself, I think the answer is very positive in each case. The symbols of light and darkness are universal. The story of Mary and Joseph as vulnerable strangers seeking hospitality has many modern counterparts. The central theme of the birth of a child, with all the hopefulness that summons, speaks still to us. The development of the theme of gift, from God's gift of his son to the bringing of gifts by the three kings prompts our action and fits well in a society that is learning to give through events such as live aid, comic relief, children in need day and the various special appeals from disaster committees, most recently for the Philippines. It prompts acts of charity and kindness, from low key invitations to the lonely to share a Christmas meal, to the more organised soup kitchens and initiatives for the homeless and hungry.

This is not a mark of national identity in any exclusive way. It is boundary breaking, universal and world wide. It is not a message that springs from conquest or military might. It is not a message that defines who we are by excluding those who are not like us. The only demon in the story is the insecure and power hungry Herod. Our focus is the prince of peace.

Let us then embrace what we have. Let's be confident in our message and identity. Let's really believe we have a vision to offer and good news to share, and may all the blessings of Christmas be with you.

Sue, along with Sean and Cathy and their family, all join me in wishing you all a very happy Christmas.

***John Holdsworth Parish Priest***