

## Advent 2009

Dear Friends,

I write to you this year from prison. Not because I have been incarcerated but because I've begun serving one day a week as a chaplain at the Federal Prison in Cowansville. The inmates who live here are inside for all the reasons you read about in the newspaper every day – drug charges, robbery, drinking and driving, violent crimes.

If you've never been in a prison, you may well assume that these are all 'bad' people who deserve to be locked up and punished for what they did. And it might be easy to talk about being 'tough on crime' when those inside remain faceless and nameless to you. But when you are asked to become a chaplain, you are being invited into their lives and to receive them as you would receive Christ. That can be a real challenge.

When I meet with them here in the chapel or in their cell block, I try to meet them first as a human being like myself – and not simply as a criminal who is defined by their conviction. I imagine that they want to be listened to, understood, and cared for just like you and me. Though they have been tried and found guilty, many of them truly do seek forgiveness and a new life for themselves.

One of our baptismal vows remains a challenge to me. "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?"

I try to see Christ in each one of them. And the Christ that I see so often is the wounded Christ. Many of these guys who have inflicted violence upon others, have themselves been abused, neglected and violated in their lives. This recognition does not excuse their crime, but it reminds me that so often we act out of our wounds and end up wounding others in turn.

Jesus was tried and convicted as a criminal, whipped and hung on cross under the Roman imperial system of justice. Jesus was innocent – my guys don't pretend to be innocent. But Jesus quite literally hung with criminals as he stretched out his arms upon the cross. Today, he is still hanging with those whom we have pronounced 'guilty' and imprisoned for years on end.

Though the penitentiary system doesn't often produce real penitence (but instead anger and rage, or resignation and despair) the men who do come to the chapel to seek out the chaplains really do exhibit a desire to 'repent and believe in the good news'.

Having made a mess of their lives (and those of others), how might the light of Christ and the support of real Christian community make a difference in my life, they ask? Can I be forgiven? Can I forgive myself? Is there hope for me, or am I considered a lost cause to be forever scorned by society?

The current federal government is passing various pieces of legislation to 'get tough on crime' even while the rates of violent crime have been on the decline for years. Incarcerating more people with longer sentences has led some critics to complain about the 'Americanization of the Canadian justice system'. Many judges and criminal justice experts have told the government that their proposals are not based on any solid evidence.

Real justice is not served by putting even more people into jail for even longer periods of time. Real justice is served when both victims and offenders are given ways to acknowledge the wrong and find more constructive ways for the offender to make amends in his life and in the community. Restorative

Justice (what prison chaplains like to talk about) is about restoring people to community, not forever excluding them and condemning them to death.

At Christmas time let us ask ourselves the reason why Christ came into this world. The Gospel of John would answer, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:17) How can we in the church help to offer pardon and peace to all those our society has condemned? How might we offer to one another, this Christmas gift?

**Since our last newsletter** in October, we have enjoyed an Ecumenical Breakfast at Hotel Horizon, an Ecumenical Concert at Église St. André, an Ecumenical OutMass celebrating the gift of gay and lesbian people in our community, and our Ecumenical Study Group continues to meet on Monday mornings. So many things we do together with the other churches; what a wonderful message of unity this sends to the world. (If you wish to **see photos** of these and many other events, simply visit the web page of Grace Church at [www.gracechurchsutton.org](http://www.gracechurchsutton.org))

**Our ACW** has been busy this fall making apple pies and tourtières, and we were all very happy to buy them and stock up our freezer for the holiday season. The Christmas Bazaar also took place on November 14<sup>th</sup> with many people enjoying the purchase of baked goods and the tea afterwards. These events have made it possible for the ACW to make a very generous financial donation to Grace Church, for which we are all grateful.

On Thanksgiving Monday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, we gave thanks for the life of **George Keith Russell**, who died on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Keith had been involved in many aspects of Grace Church as warden, ecumenical representative, and oversight of Grace Church Cemetery. Keith also served in the community of Sutton as friend and helper to many in need. We will remember his dedication to the clergy of this parish, the life of this church, and the well-being of so many people in Sutton. "Rest eternal grant unto him O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him."

On Sunday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, we welcomed into the Church through Holy Baptism, **Owen Jacob Gauthier**, son of Danielle Jacobs and Eric Gauthier. His sponsors are Jessica Jacobs and Jeremy Royea.

Our thanks to all those who continue to make generous **financial contributions** to the mission and ministry of Grace Church even during these difficult economic times. Your support is appreciated.

Please join us for worship during this **Christmas season**.

Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup> at 10:30 am. Family Service. Advent readings and carols.

Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup> at 3 pm. Chantons Noel. Ecumenical sing-a-long in the Parish Hall

Thursday, December 24<sup>th</sup>, at 7:30 pm. Christmas Eve Service at Grace Church

Friday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, at 10:30 am. Christmas Day Service at Grace Church

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**Merry Christmas !**

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