

# Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

## Lake Worth, Florida

The Eve of the Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 22, 2007)

Canon Richard T. Nolan

### **“COPING WITH AND CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAY SEASON”**

*(a meditation offered occasionally at this time of year)*

Tonight's meditation is a reminder to you and to me that we are involved in the Christmas – New Year's holiday season, a period that can be emotionally challenging - even quite difficult for many people. We all know the saying often connected with the post-holiday period, “Thank God *that's* over for another year.” The Christmas and New Year's point in time frequently needs to be “coped with” as well as celebrated. It can be exhausting and depressing. Why is this so?

Unfortunately, when it comes to guidance for daily living, many individuals have a long list of “shoulds” and “oughts.” I should do *this*; I ought to do *that*. However, it seems that we do not always distinguish between genuine obligations and those options that are flexible, even ignorable. Many *optional* “shoulds” and “oughts” are connected to holiday observances.

Countless customs and expectations surrounding the holidays have become emotionally very important to the majority. These festivals are overflowing with invented, mandatory agendas and feelings. Norman Rockwell's depictions as well as many holiday advertisements featuring a happy, contented, three-generation family have brainwashed multitudes about imaginary fundamentals of these holidays. Many have been taught that everyone should be close at hand, healthy, radiant, and wonderful to be with. By implication, when individuals do not fit those circumstances, they might regard themselves as inferior, even unlovable.

Consider all those who *do not* measure up to Rockwellian and advertising standards: widows and widowers; the divorced and otherwise single; those without parents, children or grandchildren; single parents; those unable to afford impressive gifts; many bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people; those in a marriage or partnership that has become embattled or indifferent; those stuck with “relatives from hell”; people involuntarily out of work; individuals suffering exclusion for any number of cruel reasons; those who have been economically victimized by corrupt business executives; those who contend with health concerns in themselves and/or those they love; and, those suffering from grief. I am sure that there are additional circumstances. I am equally sure that the relationships still culturally idealized, even in many religious groups, are a clear minority. Those that *do not* measure up flawlessly are actually in the vast majority.

Another unhelpful factor is excessive busyness. Malls, churches, and parties can be draining locales during the pre-Christmas weeks and at the New Year. We need to remember that we are not obligated to participate in everything. When we feel too rushed, we might bear in mind that in most instances we are as busy as we want to be. Sometimes, chronic busyness can be a symptom of exaggerated self-importance.

What's more, as an added let-down, we are too often thrown in with obnoxious people we really do not want to be with. Such overbearing folks can infect others with their chronic anger, endless chatter and unhelpful disapprovals. Their nastiness often blooms during what should be festive times.

A number of mental health resources have provided some ways of coping with stress and dejection during the holidays; here are some of their suggestions:

- Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable. Rethink any utopian hopes that cannot be met with reasonable efforts.

- If you have recently suffered a significant loss, choose genuinely comforting (or at least tolerable) ways to spend the holidays. No one pattern works for everybody.
- Set a realistic pace for yourself. Be levelheaded about what you can and cannot do. Learn to set reasonable limits and to say “no” as well as “yes.” Be sure to save time to recharge your batteries! Let others share the responsibility of activities.
- Avoid con artists both inside and outside of churches.
- Remember that the holiday season does not totally banish all reasons for feeling sad or lonely; there is room in our lives for these feelings. However, with some constructive planning one can avoid *wallowing* in extreme negativity or self-pity. If you are to be by yourself during these days, use to your advantage the many freedoms provided by being on your own.
- Leave yesteryear in the past and look toward the future. Each season of life is different and can be enjoyed in its own way. Do not set yourself up for holiday miseries by comparing today with the “good old days” and by allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by sentimental piety.
- Be aware that substance abuse (including too much alcohol) will only increase feelings of sadness.
- Possibly, celebrate the holidays in a new way. Create your own unique time! Do not get locked into being with the same people in the same place every year, unless you *really want* to be with them.
- In any case, if you can, spend holiday times with supportive and caring people. Do not get stuck with disagreeable people, even if they are relatives. Walk away from grumbling malcontents. Avoid injustice collectors! There is plenty of room in Christian living for self-care, self-regard, and for festive times. Self-neglect and emotional masochism are not Christian virtues.
- Possibly, reach out and make new contacts, or get in touch with someone you have not heard from for a while. However, even being alone can provide a fine holiday and is certainly not a failing.
- Spend money carefully. Costly gifts are never necessary. Debt arising from careless spending eventually backfires both emotionally and financially.
- Finally, even during the holiday season, church services are not “for solace only,” but also “for strength” to meet challenges inherent in the Gospel. Do not expect *faithful* churches to offer comfort without reasonable challenges. “For solace only” listen to some pleasant music at home!

You and I can cope with and observe this holiday season by planning carefully to resist its busyness and the various customary “shoulds” and “oughts.”

For Christmas, focus on its primary meaning: the annual celebration of the birth of the misfit, unfashionable bachelor Jesus, the One who lived courageously and who truly personifies God’s purposes for all humanity.

Additionally, look upon the New Year as a symbol of a new episode of life, another “new beginning.”

Within this overall perspective, you and I can more than cope with these weeks. We can deliberately choose to celebrate the season profoundly. We can decide to endure the negative stuff that may be in our lives. *Most importantly*, we can consciously and intentionally focus on the birth of Jesus the Christ -- God’s Word Who was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

