

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, year 'B' – Candlelight Carol Service
18 December 2011
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

One of the most famous paintings of the last century is *The Dance* by Henri Matisse. It may be familiar to you. Five dancers holding hands form a ring on a background of blue and green. There is a sense of tremendous energy in this painting, and looking at it, you can't help being caught up in its sense of joy and unity and connectedness. But when you look a little more closely, you notice two of the dancers' hands do not quite connect. The one reaches out to the other, but their hands do not meet. The circle is broken; it is not whole.

A broken circle. Perfection and union and wholeness are always just out of reach. We find ourselves dancing our way through life, and we are told that the dance is a joyous one. But we do not feel it, and we dance the steps not exultantly, but frantically, trying to reach out our hands only to find our arms too short. We can drop out of the dance, but of course that just leaves a wider gap. We can go on numbly dancing, no longer trying to reach out and the circle will never be complete.

At Christmas, more than at any other time of the year, we reach out to others and others reach out to us through Christmas cards, telephone calls, friendly greetings to strangers on the street. Families reach out from one generation to another. And, as we grow older, we reach backward through our memories of past Christmases, to treasured and cherished times past. In other words, at Christmas we begin to join hands and try a little harder to close the gaps between us. When we do this, we get a new perspective on things.

This happens because we remember and give thanks that once upon a time God reached out to us, to this human family. He reached out in a man very much like us, who faced many of the same trials and tribulations we do. And when he came, he reached out to everyone and said, "Join hands with me."

He is the Lord of the Dance, Jesus, the Son of God. At Christmas he invites us to clasp hands and join in the dance of joy that is at the heart of all things, the dance when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. We will always have a broken circle if we never find new partners to join us. And inviting others to join our dance is what celebrating Christmas is all about. Tell the good news of the season to the whole world; invite everyone to join the dance, for its choreography is to be danced by all of God's creation.

We will never live to see the dance completed, and we must always remember that it is God alone – not we – who can perfect it and finish it. Much of the time it may not feel like a dance of joy, but rather like a grim dirge. We may even wound our feet

treading its steps. But Jesus is leading us with his own wounded feet, and he says to us that the time is coming when imperfections and brokenness and wounded bodies will be gathered up into one and redeemed and made complete in the dance around that place of unity, the throne of God.

That is our Christmas prayer. That is our Christmas joy. That is our Christmas hope.

Thanks be to God.