



The S. Stephen

The monthly news at S. Stephen's Church in Providence

December, 2009/January, 2010

Vol. 9, No. 4

From the Rector



My dear people:

As I write this letter, the Church has entered into the Season of Advent, the annual time of preparation for the coming of Christ—an advent that has traditionally been understood as comprising three comings: his birth in Bethlehem two thousand years ago; his final coming to judge the world at the end of time; and his coming into our hearts here and now as we prepare to meet him.

Yet in the cycles of the Church year, as in the cycle of life itself, times of preparation always give way to the times of fulfillment and celebration. Thus Advent gives way to the Christmas Season, which begins on Christmas Eve, Friday 24 December, with the annual Pageant and Family Mass at 5:30 pm, and the Solemn Mass of the Nativity at 10:30 pm.

Contrary to secular society, which identifies the Christmas Season with the pre-Christmas shopping rush, in the Church calendar the Christmas Season only begins on December 25. Several dates to note during the season include our celebration of our patronal festival of Saint Stephen, which we are transferring to Sunday 27 December. As in previous years, our relic of Saint Stephen will be on the altar during the celebration of Mass on this day and will be made available for individual veneration by the faithful afterwards.

After Christmas, it is my hope to get away for a few days and visit family in the Philadelphia area. But I plan to return in time for New Year's Day when, as always, we will celebrate the Feast of the Circumcision and Naming of Christ at the Low Mass in the Lady Chapel; and later in the day will be offering our annual New Year's Dinner for the Needy. Please sign up on one of the sign-up sheets that will be available the next few Sundays at Mass to help with set-up, serving, or clean-up.

The celebrated "Twelve Days of Christmas" take us through the Feast of the Epiphany on Wednesday 6 January, which we shall observe with Sung Vespers (5 pm) and Sung Mass (5:30 pm) in the Lady Chapel. In the contemporary Church calendar the Christmas-Epiphany season concludes the following Sunday (this year January 10) on the Feast of the Baptism of Christ—one of the great baptismal days of the Church Year when we shall be administering the Sacrament of Holy Baptism during the principal Sunday Mass.

Later in the month, just as the season of Advent preparation gives way to the season of Christmas fulfillment, so our Curate's time of preparation will culminate in his ordination to the Sacred Priesthood on Saturday 26 January at 11 am. Anticipation of this wonderful event has found me thinking about various ordinations, both past and future.

In the coming year, I will celebrate the sixteenth anniversary of my own ordination to the priesthood on June 5, 1993 at Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in Wayne, Pennsylvania. I had left my secular job four years earlier to begin studies at Virginia Theological Seminary in the Fall of 1989. Three years later, I had graduated from seminary with my Master of Divinity and had been ordained to the diaconate. The long-anticipated priestly ordination itself marked the beginning of my life and ministry as a priest of the Church, which continues to this day.

The anniversary of a priest's ordination becomes as important an annual milestone as a birthday or a wedding anniversary; and for this reason we try at S. Stephen's to remember our priests' anniversaries of ordination in the weekly Parish Notes. Just as we send birthday cards and anniversary

cards, so it is particularly appropriate to send a card offering best wishes and prayers on a priest's anniversary of ordination. Elsewhere in this issue of *The S. Stephen*, I have written more about what to expect in the ordination service.

I mention all this to highlight the importance of the event that is scheduled to take place here at S. Stephen's early in the New Year. At 11 am on January 23, 2010, the Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold, 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (retired), will ordain Deacon Michael G. Tuck to the Sacred Order of Priests in Christ's One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. It is an event that will forever establish his identity as a priest of the Church. We owe it to him—and to the Church—to be there to offer him our support and prayers.

With all best wishes and prayers, I remain, faithfully

Your pastor and priest,

Fr. John D. Alexander +

Fr. John D. Alexander



Christmas, 2009

Deacon Michael Tuck writes:**Dear People of S. Stephen's,**

This Sunday morning, I was reminded of what winter in Providence is like. There was a beautiful coating of snow on all of the roofs and a fine coating of ice on the steps. It began to sink in that the fall is over, the fall semester is coming to an end, and winter is here. It's been very interesting to me to navigate both the parish schedule and the university. Although they both begin in the fall, and both reach a kind of climax at Christmas, they feel very different. At the university, there is a palpable sense of urgency. Students only have a few weeks to complete their courses and only a few years to complete their degrees. By contrast, the project here at S. Stephen's takes a lifetime or more. But within that project, S. Stephen's has taken on an important and active role supporting the religious communities at Brown.

As mentioned in the program for the Lessons and Carol's service, most of the readers were students at Brown. Four of the students regularly attend the services on Sunday evening, and some of them are known to us on Sunday morning. The other two students are members of the Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) which meets on Friday evening in the Guild Hall. And as in the past, the Eastern Orthodox Student Fellowship continues to use the Lady Chapel for some of their services. In fact, the icons on the S. Thomas Beckett altar belong to the Orthodox community. So, although

much of our focus has been on the emerging Episcopal Campus Ministry, S. Stephen's support of the religious community extends quite far.

When we were planning this fall, it was our hope that there would be some crossover between my work at the university and at the parish. In the last few months, this has really begun to take shape. Earlier this month, the Episcopal Campus Ministry was privileged to host Bishop John Zawo from our companion diocese of Ezo in the Southern Sudan. By drawing on both the parish and the university resources we were able to host a talk that brought together a very interesting and diverse group of people.

While Bishop John was here, he said something that really struck me. Looking at the church when he first came in, he said that we were blessed that Christians in the past had worked so hard for us. And he insisted on having me take pictures of him in front of the high altar and the altar in the Lady Chapel to show his people in the Sudan. In his talk, Bishop John described the situation of Christians in his diocese, and he showed us pictures of his people and of the cathedral that he is trying to build. Bishop John spoke passionately about his people's lack of security and their difficulties in providing basic services such as schools and basic medical care. He described how the Christians in Ezo continue to strive to live out the gospel despite the difficulties and the risks they run in simply proclaiming to be Christians.

Bishop John's talk inspired me to think more about the work that we are trying to do, and the way in which we are trying to be the Church of God here in Providence. Just as Bishop John is called to be a witness for the faith in the Sudan, we are called to be a witness to the faith in this place today. And although the challenges are very different, the task is the same and the goal is the same: to find a way of being the Church of God wherever we are called.



Pageant coordinator Julia Steiny reports that we are short of angels for this year's annual Christmas Pageant.

Rehearsal will be held on Saturday morning, December 19th, from 10-12 pm with pizza for lunch.

Early call on Christmas Eve is at 4 pm, with the performance at 5:30.

TREASURER'S CORNER

by Brian Ehlers

Did you know?

The Vestry has approved a budget for the parish for 2010 totaling **\$468,813**. Of this amount, **\$74,647** (approximately 16 per cent) will go to the Diocese of Rhode Island as our apportionment assessment.

The Diocese of Rhode Island has a total budget for 2010 of **\$3,946,446**. Of this amount, **\$475,183** (approximately 12 per cent) will go to the National Church.

Of the total Diocesan budget, approximately **51 per cent** comes from funding by the parishes. The remaining **49 per cent** comes from other sources. Most of this is from **restricted income** from the Diocesan Investment Trust (Endowment).

It is my opinion that the diocese is too large and costly relative to its value to its parishes. I will continue to take advantage of my membership on the Diocesan Commission of Finance and Diocesan Council to work to reduce diocesan apportionment funded programs so that churches can use more of these funds to meet their specific local needs.

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www.sstephens.org

What to Expect at an Ordination

by Father Alexander

An ordination is a profoundly moving event, typically marking the end of a lengthy and rigorous period of training and formation, including several years in seminary; and likewise the beginning of a lifetime as a deacon, priest, or bishop of the Church. It has been many years since we have had an ordination at S. Stephen's. Unlike more familiar occasional liturgies such as baptism and confirmation, its ceremonies may thus be unfamiliar to many parishioners. Looking ahead to the scheduled ordination of Deacon Michael Tuck to the priesthood on Saturday 23 January, some advance explanation may be helpful of what an ordination is and what we can expect during the service.

Holy Orders in the Church

In churches of the Catholic tradition—including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican—an ordination is the service in which the Sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred. There is one Sacrament of Holy Orders, administered successively in three degrees: deacon, priest, and bishop. Not all deacons go on to be ordained to the priesthood; but all those ordained to the priesthood must first be deacons. Likewise, only a few priests go on to become bishops, but all bishops must first be priests.

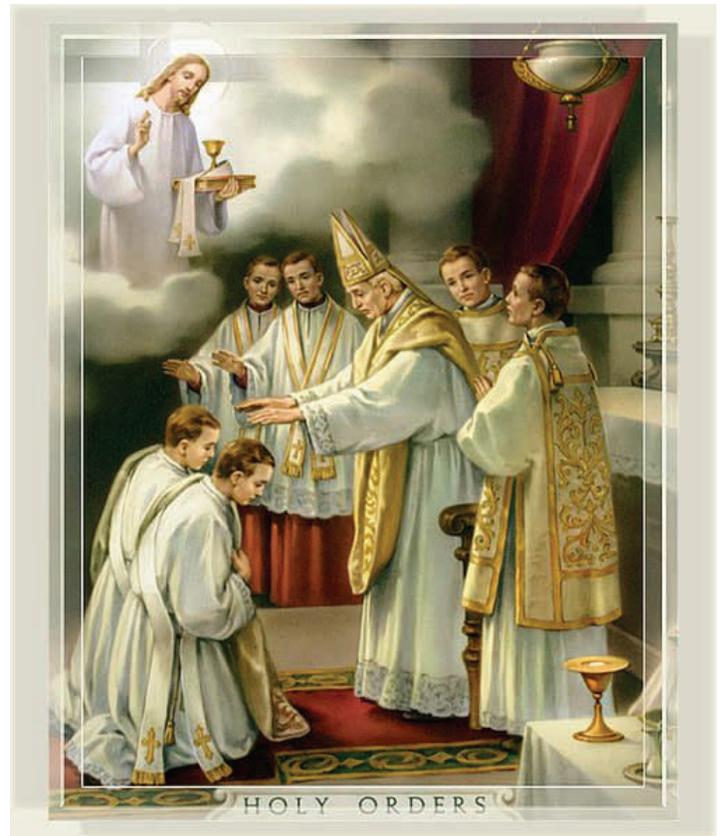
The minister who presides at the ordination is always a bishop. Either the bishop of the diocese presides or another bishop may be asked to preside for personal reasons such as being a family friend of the person to be ordained.

The action by which the bishop ordains is always the laying-on-of-hands accompanied by a fixed prayer calling down the Holy Spirit upon the candidate to make him a deacon, priest, or bishop of the Church. At the ordination of a deacon (also called the making of a deacon), the bishop ordains alone. At the ordination of a priest, the priests of the diocese join the bishop in the laying-on-of-hands. At the ordination of a bishop (also called the consecration of a bishop) at least two assisting bishops join in the laying-on-of-hands.

This procedure of ordination by bishops is designed to safeguard the apostolic succession, the unbroken chain of the laying-on-of-hands believed to go back to the apostles themselves. Thus, a priest who is ordained receives the authority to celebrate Mass and to pronounce absolution not just from the local Church of today, but from the universal Church in all times and places going back to the original apostles and ultimately to Christ himself.

An ordination differs in important respects from what may be the more familiar service of the institution of a new rector in a parish. The chief difference is that the institution liturgy marks the beginning of a period of service in a particular office with a particular jurisdiction which, sooner or later, comes to an end. The person so instituted eventually leaves that office, by way of resignation, retirement, or death. The current bishop of a diocese, or the current rector of a parish, one day ceases to be diocesan bishop or parish rector and another takes his office.

Ordination, by contrast, admits the candidate to Holy Orders *permanently* and *indelibly*. By ordination to the priesthood, one becomes “a priest forever.” Thus, ordination to any one of the three degrees of Holy Orders is *unrepeatable*. For this



reason, also, in the Prayers of the People departed clergy are customarily prayed for with mention of their Order made after their name. A basic principle of the theology of Holy Orders is that even bishops, priests, or deacons who cease to exercise an active ordained ministry in the Church—such as those who leave to pursue secular careers, or those who “resign their orders” or who are deposed for disciplinary reasons—nonetheless remain bishops, priests, or deacons forever in the sight of God.

The Ordination Liturgy

The contours of the ordination liturgy reflect the theology of Holy Orders outlined above. The service of ordination of a priest is found on pages 524-535 of the 1979 Prayer Book.

During the first half of the service, the bishop presides from a chair facing the people. At least two presenters, a priest and a lay person, present the candidate (known as the “ordinand”) to the bishop. The bishop briefly questions the presenters to verify that the ordinand has been properly selected and is suitable to be ordained. The ordinand then affirms his loyalty to “the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church,” solemnly declaring that he believes “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” The congregation affirms its will that the ordinand be ordained a priest and promises to uphold him in his ministry.

At this point, the Litany of Ordinations “or some other approved litany” is said or sung. In Anglo-Catholic parishes such as S. Stephen's, the Litany of the Saints is almost always sung at this point; and during the Litany the ordinand prostrates himself on the ground before the bishop as a sign of his submission to the authority of the Church in whose name he will act once ordained.

Following the readings, sermon, and Creed, there comes the Examination, in which the bishop addresses the ordinand directly, explaining the responsibilities of the priesthood. The ordinand responds by making a series of promises to the bishop, known as the Ordination Vows.

The climactic moment of the liturgy arrives when the ordinand kneels before the bishop, and the priests present gather round. The hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (“Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire ...”) is sung, emphasizing that it is the Holy Spirit who will make the ordinand a priest in the Church by the laying on of the bishop’s hands. Then, praying the appointed prayer, the bishop lays hands on the ordinand’s head, with the priests present also laying on hands.

There follows the ancient ceremony known as the *traditio symbolorum*, the delivery of the emblems of the priestly order. The new priest is clothed in priestly vestments. The bishop anoints the new priest’s hands with oil, consecrating them to handle the sacred elements of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. A Bible is presented to the new priest, symbolizing his authority to preach the Gospel, and a chalice and a paten are likewise presented, symbolizing his authority to celebrate Mass.

At this point, the Peace is exchanged, and the service continues with the celebration of the Eucharist by the bishop, assisted by the new priest. The bishop asks the new priest to give the final blessing at the end of the Mass.

The First Mass of the New Priest

By tradition, the new priest celebrates his first Mass—customarily a Votive of the Holy Spirit—on the day after his ordination. Since ordinations often happen on Saturday, it is particularly appropriate to schedule the new priest’s first Mass at the principal Sunday service the next day. At the end of his first Mass, the new priest traditionally remains at the altar rail to give his blessing to members of the congregation who come forward to receive it. Holy cards are often printed for this occasion and given to members of the congregation as a reminder to pray for the new priest in his ministry; and, in a touching custom, flowers are presented to the new priest’s mother if she is present.

Conclusion

An ordination is the celebration not only of a most important milestone in the life of the new priest, but also in the life of the Church itself. The ordination liturgy celebrates the continuation of the apostolic ministry in the Church from generation to generation by the gift of the Holy Spirit. We receive the assurance that God is continuing to call and set apart individuals to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments for the building up of the Body of Christ. We are also reminded that the Spirit’s gifts are likewise distributed to all baptized persons to share in the Church’s mission in a manner appropriate to our different callings. For all these reasons, an ordination is one of the most joyous occasions imaginable in our life together as a parish; and we should make every effort possible to be present for the one upcoming on January 23rd.



Harmonia Anglicana by Brian Ehlers

In this season of Advent we are meant to prepare ourselves to receive Christ, not only when he comes at Christmas but when he comes again in glory. At S. Stephen’s Church on the evening of 29 November a packed church did just that at the Advent Lessons and Carols service.

If you are able to, but haven’t yet attended this annual service, you should re-think your priorities next year and attend. Others have gotten the message. This traditional service at S. Stephen’s has had a continually growing congregation of guests and parishioners. Very few churches today have the resources or the will we have to continue our long standing tradition of beautiful music. We parishioners enjoy our choir’s liturgical Mass settings every week. But at Lessons and Carols we reach many visitors and guests; and some may be moved to come again for a Sunday Solemn High Mass.

It’s such a simple service; just over an hour long but, oh, so moving and sweet. Seven or eight lessons are read each followed by a sung carol, often based on the text of the lesson. Congregational hymn singing is interspersed. The congregation obviously included a large number of good singers. A very strong “thrilling voice” was heard. And why not with such wonderful hymns as *Helmsley* (“Lo! he comes, with clouds descending”), *Stuttgart* (“Come, thou long expected Jesus”), *Merton* (“Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding”), and *Winchester New* (“On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry”)! This year six of the eight lessons were read by Brown students; very fitting now that Deacon Tuck is with us as Curate and Episcopal Campus Minister to Brown and RISD. I noticed that some of the guests were students! Good News!

I said that it was a simple service. Yes. But it might be more accurate to say that the service flows so very smoothly and is given so well that it seems simple. From the *Matin Responsory* sung by the choir from the Lady Chapel—“I look from afar: and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth”—to the *Bidding Prayer*—“Beloved in Christ, in this season of Advent, let it be our care and delight to hear again the message of the Angels”—read by the Rector, through the lessons, carols and hymns to the Advent Blessing given by the Rector: “May Almighty God, by whose providence our Savior Christ came among us in great humility, sanctify you with light of his blessing and set you free from all sin.”

Yes, we did it wonderfully with the assistance of beautiful singing and beautiful words. We prepared ourselves to receive Christ, not only when he comes at Christmas but when he comes again in glory. Taken all together, the experience was just one more reason to attend church, to hear, and learn “The Good News” of the Gospel.

In the bleak midwinter

Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign;
In the bleak midwinter
A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate,
Jesus Christ.

Enough for him, whom Cherubim
Worship night and day
A breast full of milk
And a manger full of hay.
Enough for him, whom angels
Fall down before,
The ox and ass and camel
which adore.

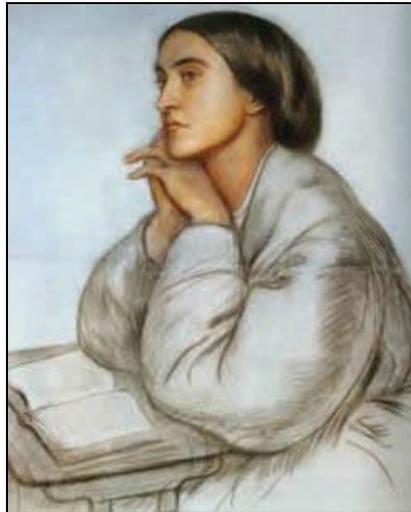
Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him —
Give my heart.

—Christina Rossetti

Editor's Note: Rossetti's poem, *In the bleak midwinter* became widely known after her death. It was first set to music by Gustav Holst. The 1984 Hymnal contains two of Rossetti's poems set as Christmas hymns: 84—*Love came down at Christmas*; and 112—*In the bleak midwinter*, which is usually sung by our choir at the Midnight Mass in a choral version set by Harold Darke.

This story was compiled by Karen V. Williams thanks to Wikipedia, a little story passed on by Tom Oakes and Father Alexander's email reminder that Rossetti is an Anglo-Catholic heroine.



Christina Rossetti

(1830-1894)

Christina Rossetti is the 19th century Anglo-Catholic movement's foremost poet. Her poetry helped illuminate the spiritual and devotional ideals of the movement for a wide readership and thus helped popularize them. Her Anglo-Catholicism was the most important commitment in her life; and she was a close collaborator with many of the movement's leaders.

The daughter of Gabriele Rossetti, a Neapolitan poet and political asylum seeker in London, Christina Rossetti was born into a family of artists and writers. Her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a painter and poet. He painted the above portrait of his younger sister. Christina also modeled for his paintings, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini*. She was educated at home by her mother, Frances Polidori. Her boisterous family became the hub for Italian exiles where culture and politics were discussed long into the night. This artistic and intellectually alive family also produced the English writer and critic, Williams Michael Rossetti and writer Maria Francesca Rossetti.

In the 1840s Christina's father suffered both physical and mental health problems and the family fell on hard times. Christiana herself had a nervous breakdown and had to leave school when she was 14. In the years to come she endured depression and related illness. It was during this time that both she and her mother discovered the Anglo-Catholic movement.

Though she began to write at the age of 7 she was first published in the *Athenaeum* magazine when she was 18. Her brother, Dante, who was a member of the avant-garde painter's movement known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, edited their literary magazine, *The Germ*, and her work was published there. Her most famous collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, was published in 1862 when she was 31. This work received a great deal of critical praise and following Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861, Rossetti was hailed as her natural successor.

According to Wikipedia the poem, *Goblin Market*, "...at first glance may seem merely to be a nursery rhyme about two sisters' misadventures with goblins, the poem is multi-layered, challenging, and complex. Critics have interpreted the piece in a variety of ways: seeing it as an allegory about temptation and salvation; a commentary on Victorian gender roles and female agency; and a work about erotic desire and social redemption..."

From 1859-1870, Rossetti was a volunteer worker at the St. Mary Magdalene house of charity in Highgate, a refuge for former prostitutes. She turned down two marriage proposals because she was not religiously compatible with either suitor. Her brother, William, joked that she was "replete with the spirit of self-postponement." A fan of self-discipline, she quit playing chess because she enjoyed winning too much and glued paper strips over the anti-Christian parts of Algernon Swinburne's poem *Atlanta in Calydon*.

In her poetry, Rossetti, took on the big topics of love, death, religion and renunciation. "Your instinct was so sure, so direct, so intense that it produced poems that sing like music in one's ears—like a melody by Mozart or an air by Gluck," Virginia Woolf wrote.

Near the end of her life, she suffered from Graves Disease and in 1893 developed cancer and died the following year. She is buried in Highgate Cemetery. Modernism in the early 20th century snuffed out Rossetti and other Victorian writers' popularity but in the 1970s feminist scholars recovered and commented on her work. Today her writing has been rediscovered and she has once again been admitted to the Victorian literary canon.

The Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Discovered the Hidden Gospels

by Janet Soskice [Alfred A. Knopf]

Book Review: by Phoebe Pettingell

It sounds like fiction: in 1892, a pair of orphaned Scottish women travel to the Holy Land by themselves, talk their way into the library of St. Catherine's Orthodox Monastery at Mount Sinai—an all-male enclave—and there discover a very early copy of the Gospels written underneath the letters of another book. Though not formally trained as scholars, they manage to photograph its pages, bring it back to England, then publish the text which revises Bible scholarship as it has been known. Yet the amazing tale Janet Soskice tells is completely factual. Though the author has written a gripping story, she herself is a scholar of considerable attainment. If you want to know more about the basis of modern Bible research, this volume is a perfect starting point. Even if you don't, it provides an absorbing account of what determined individuals can do against all odds.

Agnes and Margaret Smith were twin sisters, born in 1843 in Scotland. Their mother died soon after their birth, so they were raised by their prosperous lawyer father. Early in their upbringing, he promised them that for each language they learned, they would be taken to visit its country of origin. Thus, when their father died in 1866, the twenty-three year old twins had already seen Europe, including Greece, and decided it was time to travel more adventurously. Great Britain was being swept by Egyptomania, thanks to the building of the Suez Canal. So the sisters decided to rent a boat and take a trip down the Nile.

Soskice observes that it is difficult at this late date to determine whether Agnes and Margaret were extraordinarily brave or just foolhardy. Egypt at this time was hardly a safe place for two young women to journey without a male chaperone (they did take a slightly older female friend along, but she was no more used to traveling rough than they). Conditions outside Cairo were primitive and, at the start of the journey, none of the women knew Arabic though the resourceful Agnes began learning on the spot. But though they may have been innocent, as well as courageous, they were also inspired by their strong Presbyterian faith. Believers in predestination, they felt that God's plan for them was already ordained—therefore, they need not worry because his will would be done.

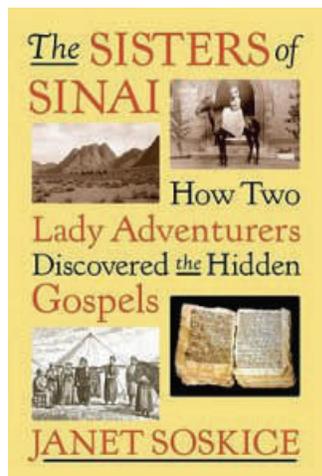
This initial voyage to antique lands inspired in the sisters both a love of Middle Eastern peoples and a fascination with antiquities, especially those connected with the Bible. The sisters had read available editions of the Greek New Testament, but scholars realized even the extant texts of this were flawed. "You stand on the authority of Scripture," sneered followers of Thomas Paine, "but you cannot determine what was originally written." Some doubters suggested that the Gospels had been written as late as the middle ages, since no earlier manuscripts could be proved. The Vatican possessed a text (dating from the early 4th century) but would not allow outsiders to study it, although parts of it had been available to Renaissance scholars and it had

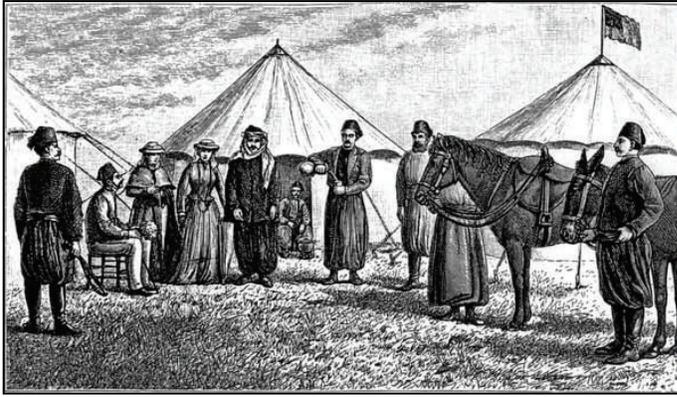
influenced certain 16th and 17th century translations. Then, in 1859, Constantin von Tischendorf discovered what later came to be known as the *Codex Sinaiticus* at St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai. This ancient Greek text was written no later than 360 AD. Though slightly later that the *Codex Vaticanus* it was seen by scholars. Its discovery finally proved the antiquity of the New Testament, although it also contained several non-canonical books, most notably the Epistle of

Barnabas and part of "The Shepherd of Hermas." When transcribed, it showed some notable differences from other extant manuscripts. This discovery renewed interest in what treasures might lie undiscovered throughout the Middle East.

Agnes Smith immediately began to learn ancient Middle Eastern languages, and she and Margaret determined to travel to St. Catherine's themselves from their new home in Cambridge. This they managed in 1892, and also persuaded the monks to let them examine the library as well. By now, much of the *Codex Sinaiticus* lay in St. Petersburg—stolen, according to the monks, by von Tischendorf, though he claimed he had lent it to the Tsar who mistook it for a present. The library was much more restricted to scholars in consequence, but the indomitable sisters managed to charm the librarian into showing off its treasures. Among them was a palimpsest—a text with several layers of writing (in this case, an older work, with a newer one written over the original text). Writing a new work over an earlier manuscript was common when parchment was scarce. The more visible text appeared to be a popular account of female saints dating to AD 697, but the Syriac underwriting appeared to Agnes to be from the Gospels. With a primitive camera, the sisters photographed it. This took months, and life between the women and the monks became somewhat strained. The Smiths lived in tents on the grounds, since they could not sleep in an all-male enclosure. Their own Calvinist views clashed with the Orthodox religious processions, icons and incense which struck them as idolatrous. But an underlying fondness on both sides of the religious divide produced enough ecumenical affection for them to be allowed to finish their work.

When they reached Cambridge with their photographs and showed them to Bible scholars, there was considerable excitement. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. In addition, it was the liturgical language of many Middle Eastern Christians. Syriac versions of the New Testament existed throughout the early years of Christianity. The original ones were paraphrases from the Greek in which the four Gospel narratives were combined into one, but later they were actual translations so that they might be used as lectionary Bibles among Aramaic speakers. After a number of further trips to Sinai and much scholarly infighting and back-stabbing, the sisters were able to prove their discovery to be the second most significant New Testament find of the era, with many valuable textual variations. In addition, they helped the monks catalogue their





great library and better protect its treasures both from the ravages of time and from the cupidity of unscrupulous tourists.

How the sisters persisted in making their work known to the world and the adventurous trajectory of their later lives makes gripping reading. But along with the adventure story of these two women who managed to become significant Bible scholars in the face of male opposition, Soskice's book reminds readers of the seismic cultural shift that was taking place in people's understandings of Holy Scripture during this period. As early variant texts began to surface, many believers found their faith in Biblical inerrancy shaken. How could we know the exact words of Jesus if the record was muddled by scribal errors and different versions of the same passage from manuscript to manuscript? Agnes and Margaret Smith had such faith in God's truth that they serenely rejected the idea that new discoveries would damage Biblical credibility. In one of her many books, Agnes considered the issue of why the Father would allow confusions to creep into his revealed book and concluded that as human beings grew in civilization and knowledge they were able to search the Scriptures ever more diligently for complexities that would have baffled more primitive cultures. This is a Darwinian explanation, consonant with Agnes's progressive Calvinist understanding. As Anglo-Catholics, we might say that the process of paleographic discovery itself represents an aspect of the Holy Spirit guiding the Church into all truth.

The discovery of ancient Bible manuscripts throughout the 19th and 20th centuries provided some interesting variant translations. More importantly, however, they have proved wrong the arguments of Thomas Paine and his Enlightenment followers that Scripture as we know it is largely a product of ecclesiastical rewriting of whatever more primitive texts may have said. In fact, discoveries from the *Codex Sinaiticus* and the sisters' Syriac translation to the Qumran and Nag Hammadi libraries reveal the considerable continuity of texts down through the ages. The Judeo-Christian traditions can argue with far greater certainty today than heretofore that the Bible as we know it is largely unchanged from its earliest texts and that variations have more to do with the errors of scribes than with attempts to put a theological spin on material intended for another purpose. As a fascinating aside, just as Soskice's book was published in the United States (it appeared in England some months earlier), the text of the *Codex Sinaiticus* appeared on the web—a remarkable feat of cooperative scholarship, since the original is divided between four libraries across the world.

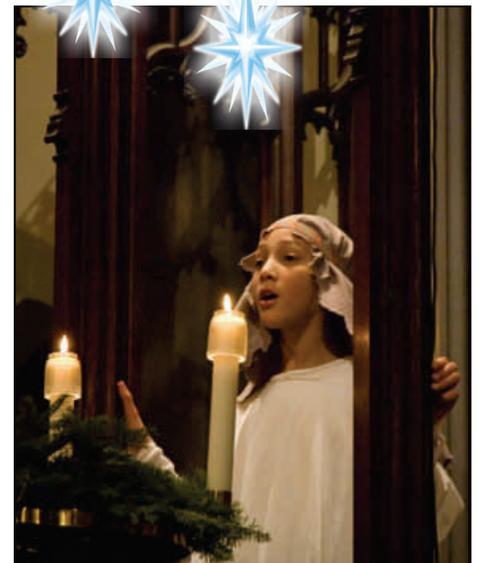
As Agnes and Margaret traveled and studied, their own spiritual understanding grew. Beginning as rather provincial Scottish Calvinists, they retained the religion of their ancestors (ultimately founding the first Presbyterian college at Cambridge), but their theological understanding expanded into a more sophisticated form. They even came to appreciate some of the Orthodox practices of their monastic friends, and one of the sisters married an Anglican clergyman. Both women lived through World War I and watched their work become one of the sources for The Revised Version of the Bible—the precursor of the Revised Standard Version, the very translation we use as our lectionary Bible at S. Stephen's to this day. For anyone interested in the Bible—or just fascinated by characters who let nothing stand in the way of what they set out to do—*The Sisters of Sinai* is not to be missed.

Christmas Eve

by Christina Rossetti

Christmas hath a darkness
Brighter than the blazing noon,
Christmas hath a chillness
Warmer than the heat of June,
Christmas hath a beauty
Lovelier than the world can show:
For Christmas bringeth Jesus,
Brought for us so low.

Earth, strike up your music,
Birds that sing and bells that ring;
Heaven hath answering music
For all Angels soon to sing:
Earth, put on your whitest
Bridal robe of spotless snow:
For Christmas bringeth Jesus,
Brought for us so low.



Singing Shepherd, Christmas Eve, 2008

**Please visit our website:
www.sstephens.org**

Read *The S. Stephen* online.
Go paperless or print your own copy.
Contact Cory MacLean in the church
office. She will put your name on the
email list and each month you will
receive the link to the online issue of
The S. Stephen.

S. Stephen's Church in Providence
114 George Street
Providence, RI 02906
Address Correction Requested



Thursday 24 December 2009

Christmas Eve at S. Stephen's Church in Providence



The Christmas Pageant, a Children's Production
5:30 pm

And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 1:7

A Family Mass follows.

Solemn Mass of the Nativity
10:30 pm

With voluntaries commencing at 10:00

Messe de Minuet de Noel, H1.9.....Marc-Antoine Charpentier
Behold, I bring you glad tidings.....Thomas Tomkins
Myn lyking.....R.R. Terry
Sung by the Schola Cantorum