

Views from the Pews: Advent 2 Crab-life and new life

Isaiah often uses images of wild animals with obvious respect, and to great effect. Today, in this beautiful and familiar passage, we have wolves, leopards, bears, lions and adders. For a change, here's one Isaiah could never have thought of.

A crab has an external skeleton, a visible and objectively definable container for the animal within. But the essence of a crab, the life of it, is not in its shell but inside, an invisible power in the soft parts that makes them pulse with blood and buzz with nervous messages. A dead crab cast up on the beach is still recognisably a crab, but does not function as one. Fortunately, crab life does not depend on any individual, because it carries on in other crabs.

Likewise, a church building is objectively definable as a religious institution, even when it is empty, but it cannot be a functional church until it is brought to life by the faith and love of its people. But faith and love do not depend on a church building. Groups of individuals meeting in each other's private homes can blossom with vigorous and infectious love, while the congregations supporting conventional religious observance in glorious surroundings wither away. Religion without active love is as dead as a cast-up crab; it is only love, with or without religion, that can give life.

Every individual crab is the temporary expression of the crab-life that it got from its parents and will pass on to its own offspring. The individual animals grow, breed and eventually die, but the life-source from which they came remains as alive, and as indefinable, as ever. Not only that, but the same properties of "aliveness" that animate any live crab also pulsate through a huge diversity of other animals, each according to its own kind. In the same way, the love that makes a church alive is passed on from one member of a congregation to another. Love is like the light of a candle, which lights new candles without losing any of its own brightness.

And, according to Isaiah's vision, we and all other forms of life shall live in peace together on God's holy mountain. We will be clothed in new bodies (lions at least will need a new digestive system). Every day we will rejoice in the way the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of God, right down to the crabs' hidden homes under the waters covering the sea.

Kim King