

## Christmas 2 2011

There once was a beautiful kingdom. The landscape was benign. There were all kinds of birds and animals. The weather was always perfect. There was plenty to eat and drink. The laws were just and merciful. No-one was expected to work hard. Everything was taken care of by a wise and good king.

But one day the inhabitants of the kingdom grew restive. Maybe life was just too easy. Maybe they were greedy for things that their king didn't provide. Perhaps they didn't feel sufficiently challenged by life in this primeval Utopia. Perhaps they felt that they needed to be free, free to reject their king's good gifts, free to make mistakes, free to grow and to progress, to be independent, to be masters of their own destiny. Anyway, whatever the reason, they constructed for themselves a ship and set sail away from the beautiful kingdom.

After many weeks of hard sailing, they finally disembarked on an uninhabited island. Here the soil was poor. There were few animals. The climate was uncertain. They worked hard, but often they were cold and hungry. What was worse was that they stopped co-operating with one another. They forgot the just and merciful laws they had learned in the kingdom. It was every man for himself. Life was much harder than it might have been because they wouldn't work together. They refused to share with one another.

The colony might have been wiped out all together if it hadn't been for the fact that every so often they found things washed up on the beach. One month it might be a wrecked ship with a cargo of grain or dried fruit or even barrels of ale. Another month, a raft would turn up with battered copies of books from an obviously great library. From these the colonists would learn how to build simple machines, bridges and musical instruments. One particularly harsh Winter an enormous consignment of fleeces was found washed up in an obscure inlet.

They couldn't explain where these things had come from. So they turned to religion for an explanation. They worshipped these cargoes as gods or they worshipped the unseen gods who had sent them the cargoes. Some of the colonists preferred to worship what they themselves had made. They needed, they thought, no gods or God save what they themselves could achieve. In time, these religious differences furnished further excuses to fall out with one another and to fight. When there was a dearth and no cargo appeared mysteriously on the shore, they would sacrifice one of their animals. If there was still no cargo, sometimes they would sacrifice a child.

Had they but known it, these anonymous gifts were sent by their king. Unwilling to invade the freedom which was so important to them, he sent them what appeared to be flotsam and jetsam, telling his captains to drop these useful gifts over the side many miles from shore so that it not be seen where they came from.

Somehow, however, there were always a few colonists who realised where the good things must be coming from and somehow messages got back to the good and wise king in his kingdom that things were far from right in the colony.

Every so often, the king decided to send the colonists a messenger. Life might be tough on the island, the messenger would say, but it could be much better if the islanders reverted to the just and merciful laws promulgated in the kingdom. If they worked together, if they shared the good things they produced with one another, there would be so much more to go round and everyone would have enough.

Sometimes these messengers were honoured, especially if they came when times were particularly harsh, when the harvest had failed, storms darkened the heavens and sickness ravaged the hovels the colonists called their homes. In these circumstances, the messengers might be listened to and their wise words acted upon. Then things would begin to improve as people started to work together for the common good. Even so, once the crisis was over, the messengers words would usually be archived and forgotten.

More often than not, however, the king's messengers were ignored. The whole point of the rebellion was to prove that the islanders were self-sufficient. They did not need the king, his laws or his gifts of material goods. They were happier and freer fending for themselves. So what if life was nasty, brutish and short? At least it was living.

Some of the messengers received a commission to promise a return to Utopia. Not only would the colonists be happier and more prosperous on the island if they obeyed the good king's wise laws, but one day they might return to the good land they had left behind. One day, they foresaw, a messenger would come with a special commission to bring the exiles home.

These messengers were often especially badly treated – not only ignored, but openly abused, sometimes tortured and occasionally killed. But they had a further message. The sacrifice of animals or even of human beings could not win the favour of those powerful beings beyond the island. Mostly the existence of those beings was nothing more than a myth. They didn't exist. So they couldn't do anything to save the islanders. Neither could the islanders save themselves by the works of their own hands. Somehow, however, the martyrdom of the true king's servants, their voluntary offering of themselves in self-sacrificial love, would bear witness to the powerful love of the king who would forgive the colonists' rebellion against him and restore everything they had lost through their disobedience and folly if only they would let him.

At last the king knew that the time for which he had been preparing had come. It was time to go to the island himself. No different apparently from any of the islanders, he joined in the life of the colony as one of them. He taught them what the law really meant. He set the colonists an example. He explained the message of the messengers whom he had sent to the island in the course of many long years. A few of the islanders accepted him though they did

not understand him. The majority, however, rejected the king's son, as they had rejected the king. As the king had foreseen they would, the islanders made a sacrifice of his son.

And yet the son was not dead. His death had fulfilled everything necessary to undo the colonists' alienation from their king. He returned to the kingdom which he had never left and yet he remained on the island to strengthen with his presence those who had put their trust in the king's son.

True freedom, it turned out, was the freedom to be yourself. Freedom was not to be found in adolescent rebellion against authority. In order to be free you needed to be free from greed and lust and selfishness and indifference and hatred and all those things which destroy. A free man or woman or child is one who embraces freely such things as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

This is life in the kingdom once a man or woman acknowledges his kinship with the king. To this life the islanders will indeed one day return. Or at least those who accept the message of the son will one day so return. In the meantime they can live the life of the kingdom as long as they remain on the island. For the faithful islanders this will be a foretaste of the life to come and for the so far faithless islanders it will be a witness to what life truly is in the kingdom and what life would be for them too if only they would accept it as their king's good gift.