

Coming of the Light. 1 July 2018. First Sunday reflecting on Stewardship. We are Blessed.

Close your eyes. Just for a moment. A bit longer. How about for ever? What would you miss if you were forever in darkness? Many people are born blind and know no other world. Many become blind through accidents and other factors. They know what others see and have lost that ability. And there are some who cannot see who come to be able to see.

In the parish where I worked when I was first ordained there was a woman who had extremely limited sight. She was, effectively, blind. Having tried many treatments she had accepted that this is how she was going to be for the whole of her life. She continued to pray and live with trust. One day she appeared for a mid-week service and a few people present were surprised when she picked up the prayer book and appeared to be following it. She picked up the hymn book and sang along. We knew that she already knew the prayers and hymns by heart but she didn't usually hold the book. At the greeting of peace she was wearing a smile a mile wide as people began to approach her, and look into her face. A new medication and treatment had somehow unlocked her sight! It was a miracle.

Miracles are not necessarily supernatural acts working outside of the natural order. They are amazing points of revelation and grace, especially blessed when they are received and celebrated with thankfulness. Celebrating miracles is an opportunity. Because something is possible for someone in a specific situation but not others is something with which many people struggle. 'Why not me? Why not that person who suffers and is weighed down by constant pain?' That is an unanswerable question. We weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15). We wrestle and sit with humility, and often struggle, in the face of mystery.

For this woman this was an opportunity for thankfulness. She recognised that it was achieved through the intervention of medical science AND she gave thanks to God for the incredible blessing. When we are blessed, what do we do? Is there a part of us that takes blessings for granted? This woman let her thankfulness shine in her eyes, in her heart and it was written all over her face.

In July 1871 the Reverend Samuel McFarlane arrived in the Torres Strait. He landed at Erub, Darnley Island, supported by other missionaries who were also south sea islanders, come to share the good news with people of their region. This event, the welcome that they received, is remembered as 'the Coming of the Light'. All of the readings we have today from the Bible echo that connection.

The reading from Isaiah (Isaiah 58:8-11) is from the time when the exiles were rebuilding their lives and rebuilding their hope. Light shining into their lives was an invitation to discover ways of relating to one another in which light shines through generosity and compassion, building community, rediscovering what it means to be truly human. When we act in godly ways we ARE light to one another. And God shines in and through us.

Paul's message to the Corinthians, across both of the letters which we have in our Bible, was about strong, open, compassionate, respectful community. The constant encouragement to the Christians in Corinth was to be 'Christ-like', to reflect the essential values at the heart of God as we see them in the life and words and presence of Jesus. So, when Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6 "For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Paul is not just talking about religious 'knowledge' of God, about God. Paul is talking about the effect which comes in our lives when we live in the light. Who is Jesus? He is the essence of love and generosity and compassion and joy! He is the one in whom we see the best of who we are called to be.

Do we want others to see God? Be more Christ-like, Paul says. Do we want to show that God is there at the heart of our lives? Be loving, generous, compassionate, joyful, thankful! Start from the position in which we celebrate being blessed. St Irenaeus of Lyons wrote "The glory of God is a human person fully alive." We see that in Jesus. We are called to be that. To be light.

That is not something 'out there'. It is a blessing. It is what we already have, because we are each loved, accepted, cherished, embraced, treated with generosity and compassion, celebrated with joy, clothed in love. Sharing good news starts with being who we are. Being light. Knowing that we are blessed.

In the Gospel reading (John 12:35-47) the themes of light and darkness, blindness and seeing are woven into a narrative typical to John's presentation of Jesus' story. Encountering Jesus is challenging. It makes us look closely at how we live. It is not an intellectual exercise but an existential encounter. How will we live from this point on? Will we live in the light? Will we see God and ourselves and others clearly? For me the last verse of this passage is

extraordinarily important. John 12:47. Jesus said “I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” Is that surprising? Jesus is not judging those who don’t get it. He is not judging because living in the light is an invitation. It is an invitation to see who God is, to see who we are, to see what it means to live recognising being blessed and to step into the light.

For me this is a critical part of the good news. God works by invitation. And that in itself is a blessing. God invites. And so do we. God does not judge those who are outside that light, calling down negative consequences on them immediately. Neither are we to do that. There is a lightness of heart and a deeper generosity which comes with that realisation. The light is still inviting, compelling, a positive place to be, for all the reasons which were fleshed out in those other passages.

While I was in Bali I watched the second ‘State of Origin’ match. We wont talk about the result! One interesting thing that happened a couple of times was that players carrying the ball were dragged over the line by their opponents. In both cases these were the side lines. Having dragged the guys over the line they stood back and said “Look! Look! He is over the line!” For the poor guy holding the ball that dragging over the line meant trouble. It seemed odd to me. And being dragged into the light if it was not where you wanted to be would be just as odd. Good news is shared by invitation.

So, what happened when Samuel McFarlane and friends appeared in the Torres Strait? They were welcomed generously. Not by everyone. Not by most immediately. But they were welcomed and they shared what they had in their hearts. This event is remembered as the ‘Coming of the Light’ not only because it brought religious knowledge about God as revealed in Jesus to those people. When they encountered “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” this changed their lives. It changed how they treated each other. Disputes between groups dissipated as they learned more open and compassionate and generous ways of being and behaving. The good news changes us inside. It changes who we are. It changes how we treat each other. They let that light in. Light came to the hearts of those people.

The light they held also gave them deeper strength in how they interacted with others beyond their own community. The people of the Torres Strait were being exploited by people in ships, mostly white men, who landed there and saw the people and their community and their islands as resources. The light they now held through their new relationship with God through Christ gave them strength and united response and confidence which transformed the way in which that interaction happened from that time.

That strength has continued to the present day. It was out of that strength of Christian conviction that Torres Strait islanders stood up and appealed for the Christian values of fairness, decency, respect and honesty to be applied to them. We know the man who led that call. Eddie Mabo. That call, challenge, change was a consequence of the coming of the light.

The light which came to the Torres Strait, the Light of Christ, was seen in how lives were transformed. And for all that the people of that place continue to be thankful.

Where is that light for you? Where is the light which shines inviting each of us into more loving, generous, compassionate living? Do we hold that as a gift of inestimable value, something which infuses and illuminates what we think and say and do?

2 Corinthians 4:6 “For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” When we are aware of that, when we live that, we live from a place of being blessed. Our lives start with thankfulness.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell