

Post Tenebras Lux

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 10 April 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the fifth Sunday in Lent were Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, St John 11:1-45

If ever you find yourself in Geneva, in Switzerland, make sure you visit the Parc des Bastions. It is a well-groomed patch of green sandwiched between the University of Geneva, on one side, and the the walls of the old city, on the other. Built into one wall of the park is an imposing stretch of sandstone, 100 metres long, called The Reformation Wall.

Dominating the centre of that wall are four towering human figures. One is Jean Calvin, who nearly six centuries ago initiated Geneva's movement for church reform. Alongside him are Theodore de Beze (Calvin's successor), William Farel (one of the first to preach the reform) and John Knox (who carried the Calvinist reform to Scotland).

There are other, smaller, figures too, all associated one way or another with the early days of Protestantism. And if you look carefully you will see two blocks of stone, one at each end, bearing the names of two reformers with whom Calvin had some disagreements: one is labeled Ulrich Zwingli, the other Martin Luther. It is a very Geneva-centred view of church history!

Above and behind all these human figures are three Latin words, carved in very large letters: **Post Tenebras Lux**, which means **After the Darkness, Light**. It expresses how they felt about their movement of spiritual renewal. The phrase became the motto of the Calvinist branch of the Reformation, indeed of the Reformation generally. Eventually it was built into the coat of arms of the city and canton of Geneva. Still today, on the cantonal flag or in the logo on your Genevois driver's license, there it is: the coat of arms, with ... Post Tenebras Lux.

The words express well what all three of this morning's readings are getting at. For each of them, from its own angle, speaks of God bringing hope out of despair, life

out of death, light out of darkness. It's almost as if those who plan the church's readings decided we should have a foretaste of Easter before being plunged, next Sunday, into the darkness of Holy Week with its remembrance of Christ's betrayal, despair, suffering and execution.

First this morning we heard from the prophet **Ezekiel**.

The Jewish people had been defeated. They were languishing, in exile, in Babylon. All hope had gone. They could see no future, no possibility of a return to life. Ezekiel puts it dramatically: they were just a valley of dry, lifeless, sun-bleached bones. Utterly finished. You can almost see the dogs scavenging among them, looking for a feed but finding nothing. They were an ex-people.

Ezekiel utters what he believes God is saying to them: I am going to lay sinews upon you, restore your flesh, cover it with skin, put breath within you. You will live, and you will know that I am the Lord.

You think you're finished. But I will raise your broken spirits. I will restore your community that's as good as dead. I will empower your hearts that lack strength and courage. I will revive the hope you have lost. I will raise you up. You will know again that I am your God.

Look beyond the despair of the moment. For "After the darkness, light".

Second, we heard **Paul**, writing to the church in Rome.

He'd been talking about human nature, how it keeps colliding with the purposes of God, and how the divine Law doesn't change us but just locks us into rebelliousness. Our situation seems hopeless.

But it isn't, says Paul. In Christ, God has intervened in a new way, offering forgiveness and new beginnings. He uses what is, for our way of thinking, the difficult dichotomy of "flesh" and "spirit". By "flesh" he doesn't mean our bodies, the skin and bones and stuff that constitute our physical make-up. He means a self-centred way of living that is a distortion of our true selves. "Death," he calls it.

Martin Luther echoed St Paul's way of thinking when he taught that sin is the condition of being curved in upon oneself. We all know what that's like. It is, in Paul's language, living according to the flesh.

Let it go, he advises us. Stop focusing on yourself, including your efforts to keep the Law. You are in the Spirit, so live accordingly. Drop the defenses. Forget the pretenses. Open yourself to the mystery of grace. Let go and let God. And accept the fact that, miracle of miracles, you are loved by God, not for who you ought to be but for who you are.

True, each of us still has to live with the complicated dynamics of who we are, of what our genes and life experience may have made us. But don't be overwhelmed by your self. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," you are not the end of the story.

Don't be fixated on your failures, tangles and ambiguities. Look beyond them. For "After the darkness, light".

Third, in the long passage from **St John's Gospel**, we heard the last and greatest of the miracle stories: the raising of Lazarus.

Midway through it comes the punch line, which the rest of the story so powerfully illuminates. We've heard the line read in countless funeral services. Yet the awe the words evoke never lessens. "I am the resurrection and the life," says the Lord. "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die".

Neither I nor anyone can explain those words, any more than we can make scientific sense of the miracle story with which they are associated. Yes, we know that some things transcend attempts at explanation. And yes, we sense that here language is being forced, to express something that lies beyond words and stories. The staggering conviction that in Christ we are drawn into the very life of God.

Beyond despair. Beyond the preoccupation with self. Beyond the dramas of life and death. Light! And not only light *beyond* the darkness, mark you, but light even *within* it.

During the past week, the church remembered the martyrdom of two great Christian leaders of the 20th century. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenbergr Concentration Camp on 9 April 1945, because of his involvement in attempts to overthrow Adolf Hitler. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on 4th April 1968.

The day before he was shot, King preached what turned out to be his final sermon. It was a haunting mixture of premonition and confidence. *“I may not get there with you,”* he told his people. *“But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. For ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord’.”*

Both men sensed the darkness looming. But both glimpsed something within it, something beyond it, that made all the difference, that set them free and drove them on.

For all of us, God’s light is not just hope for tomorrow. It is reality for today.

“After the darkness, light”. Yes, a good phrase for Geneva to have on its historic wall, its flag, its coat of arms, its driver’s licenses. But that conviction is even better when carved into human memories, cherished within human hearts, and embodied in human lives.

May God make it so.

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