

Beyond the Darkness

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 6 April 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the fifth Sunday in Lent were Ezekiel 37:1-14 and St John 11:17-45

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 walls of the old city, on the other. Along one side of the park is an imposing stretch of sandstone, 100 metres long, called The Reformation Wall.

Four towering human figures dominate the monument. One is Jean Calvin, who nearly five 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 the words appear on many of Geneva's official documents. Post Tenebras Lux – After the Darkness, Light. A reassuring message to find on the letterhead of one's annual tax assessment!

The words express well what this morning's readings are getting at. Both of them, each from its own angle, speak 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".

Then, in the 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 heartbreak and loss. Beyond the dramas of life and death. Light! And not only light *beyond* the darkness, mark you, but light even *within* it.

Think of Geneva's watchword as, with Christians around the world, we start our journey into the shadows of the next two weeks. Remember it well for the next time you find yourself stumbling in darkness. And as you remember it, be thankful for all those who are our companions in remembering.

This Sunday, the church recalls the martyrdom of two such companions, two great Christian leaders of the 20th century: Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on 4 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'."*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, was hanged at Flossenburg Concentration Camp in Germany, on 9 April 1945, because of his involvement in attempts to overthrow Adolf Hitler. During his time in prison he wrote this prayer:

*"In me there is darkness, but with you there is light.
I am lonely, but you do not leave me.
I am feeble in heart, but you help me.
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience.
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me."*

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

For us too, 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 coat of arms. But even better when it is carved into human memories, cherished within human hearts, embodied in human lives.

As we journey once again towards the cross, may God make it so in us.

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