

## The Light of Christ!

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 7 April 2013, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday of Easter were Revelation 1:4-8 and St John 20:19-31.*

Near the beginning of St John's gospel is an affirmation we hear, normally, when the church is celebrating Christmas. The words are profound. We should hear them again, ponder them in our hearts again, at this time of the year. For, with majestic simplicity, they point us towards the Christ of Easter.

What are those words? You know them. *"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it"* [St John 1:4-5]

There are two motifs here, both powerful, both used a number of times by the author of John's gospel.

One is the image of *life*, which appears 36 times in the fourth gospel, and Christ as the life-bearer. We caught that again in today's gospel passage: *"These [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name"*.

The other image is *light*, and Christ as the one whom the world's darkness could not conquer. Let's focus here.

Of all the Christian ceremonies of Easter, what is surely the most dramatic takes place between sunset on the Saturday and dawn on Sunday. The custom in Roman Catholic churches as well as most Anglican churches outside this diocese, it's catching on more and more in congregations of the Uniting Church. What happens is this.

Outside the darkened, empty church, the bishop or minister lights a huge Easter candle. Bearing the candle, he or she then leads people into the church. Twice the candle-bearer pauses and sings *"The light of Christ!"* and the congregation responds *"Thanks be to God!"* As they move into the church, it is as if the light of Christ is casting out all the darkness that lies ahead. From the big candle, worshippers light their small candles. The church fills with warmth, life and light.

Once again the words: *"The light of Christ!"* And, strongly and confidently, the response: *"Thanks be to God!"*

[The huge Easter candle then is placed in a stand near the baptismal font, where it burns throughout the year as a reminder that Easter is what the church is all about. From it will be lit the candles given to the newly baptized, as well as candles used at funerals and other occasions.]

The light of Christ, victorious over the darkness that put him to death. He came to turn the world upside down, to change it forever so that love would reign rather than hate, hope rather than despair. Darkness won, or seemed to. They killed him. But death was not the end of the story. He was raised. His light conquered the darkness.

And it still does. There are moments, for all of us, when in our hearts the shadows seem terribly real. When life is a mess. When we feel scared, helpless, powerless, maybe guilty, even paralyzed, perhaps tempted to curl up fearfully in the dark. But ... Christ is risen. Don't curl up in the darkness. Claim the light of Christ!

The implications of Easter faith go far, far beyond what it means for each one of us as an individual.

I like the story of the rabbi who asked his students: how can we know the moment when the darkness of night becomes the light of day? "When you can discern that the animal in front of you is a dog and not a goat," said one student. No, said the rabbi. "When you can see that the tree in front of you is a fig tree and not an apple tree," offered another. Wrong again, said the rabbi. Then tell us Rabbi, they asked. How can we know when darkness has become light? "When you can recognize that the person in front of you is your brother or your sister," he replied.

The light of Christ puts each and every human being in a new light. Everyone is a brother, a sister. Everyone is special, everyone is loved. No exceptions. So out with bigotry in all its forms. Out with the racism that screams its hate on Sydney's buses, and with the silence that just sits there and lets it happen. Out with the vilification of asylum seekers -- from whatever side of parliament. Out with

xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, every phobia that leads human beings to hurt one another. In the light of Christ, all are our brothers, our sisters. All.

The light shines in the darkness still. And still the darkness cannot overcome it.

Be grateful that we belong to a church that helps us not only glimpse that light but also perceive some of its wider consequences. Next weekend, for example, a meeting of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW/ACT will swing into action with the theme *“For the Common Good”*. It will wrestle with issues like social justice, global warming, resourcing health care, youth suicide, education and infrastructure needs. In a dozen different ways it will challenge us to look beyond a preoccupation with “I, me, my” towards “us” the human community, hopefully “us” the worldwide human community.

In all this the church must not forget what it is, more importantly *whose* it is.

Pope Francis has said and done some important things in the few weeks since his election. One of them was a warning to his own church, to watch that it doesn't become just one more “compassionate NGO”. One of my Facebook friends noted this and wondered if Pope Francis could be persuaded to take on a second job and become head of the Uniting Church as well as his own – because, as my friend remarked, the warning against becoming just one more “compassionate NGO” is one we need to hear too!

He is right. Full marks to the Uniting Church for its social conscience and caring programs. But make sure that we anchor this compassion clearly, firmly, irrevocably, evangelically, liturgically in the faith of Easter. It used to be said of the Church of England that it behaved like the Conservative Party at prayer. Sometimes our denomination sounds a bit like the Greens at prayer. The church of Jesus Christ is and should sound like an Easter people at prayer and in action. If it's not that it's nothing.

Forty-five years ago last Thursday, on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968, an assassin's bullet brought down Martin Luther King. The day before he died, King had 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. 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord'."*

King saw the darkness. He knew it was real, and deep. But he sensed something within it, something beyond it, that made all the difference, that set him free, that drove him on.

The light shines in the darkness. The darkness did not overcome it.

One of India's greatest gifts to the world was a scholar named Rabindranath Tagore. Philosopher, poet, musician, painter, scientist, in 1913 he was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. He remains the only person to have written not just one national anthem but two – those of India and Bangladesh. Tagore left us a treasure trove of insightful quotes. Here's one to take away with you.

*"Faith," he wrote, "is the bird that feels the light and sings, when the dawn is still dark".*

God give us, your Easter people, grace to feel the light -- and strong voices to join the singing!

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