

Isaiah 58: 8-11; 2 Corinthians 4: 5-6; John 12: 35-47 5/7/20
The Coming of the Light

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In 1997, I was selected as an ordinand in the Diocese of Melbourne. This is quite a process, culminating in a conference at which there are a number of interviews and group exercises. One of my interviewers asked me, 'What do you understand by the phrase, "the word of God"?' My reply: 'Do you mean the Word made flesh or the word made print?' I'm pretty sure the interviewer thought I was trying to be smart, but I wasn't. I was simply trying to work out whether he was asking about Jesus Christ, or the Bible.

Although at the time I had never been to the Torres Strait, my question would make perfect sense there. For the Torres Strait Islanders, celebrating the gift of the Bible is akin to celebrating the incarnation. In the words of Father Elimo Tapin of St Stephen's Townsville, 'For us, the celebrations of the Coming of the Light is just like celebrating Christmas Day. On Christmas Day God came to us in the form of a baby and on July 1 God came to the Torres Strait in the form of a book.'

It happened like this. On the 1st July 1871, the Revd Samuel McFarlane of the London Missionary Society, along with some South Sea islander deacons, arrived at Erub Island in the east Torres Strait. On a nearby hill, the warrior Dabad watched as the group of men rowed towards the shore. Dabad called his men and they made their way down to the beach, but they were no welcoming party. They had spears and arrows; their intent was to kill the interlopers. McFarlane splashed his way ashore, to be met by Dabad, spear in hand. McFarlane held his Bible in both hands and thrust it towards Dabad. Then, something remarkable happened. Instead of spearing McFarlane, Dabad accepted the book, a kind of thing he'd never seen, and of course couldn't read. In accepting the Bible, Torres Strait islanders will tell you, Dabad accepted the light of Christ. From that moment, life in the Torres Strait changed.

However, this is not a white cultural takeover story. The Anglican missionaries, many of whom were Melanesians like the Torres Strait islanders, allowed traditional elements to continue in Christian worship. As Christian faith spread throughout the islands, inter-island conflict slowly ended, and a wider sense of islander community arose.

Truly, light had come to the Torres Strait islands. In the words of Isaiah,

... your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ...

or, as Paul put it, 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' was now known in the Torres Strait.

Christ as light of the world is a familiar symbol of our Christian faith. It is central to our Easter celebrations when we light the Paschal Candle and sing, 'The Light of Christ: thanks be to God.' The coming of that Light into our world and into our lives has two aspects, as the Torres Strait Islanders discovered.

First, Christ shines a light onto our own lives, showing us what needs changing, or removing, and what is good. When Dabad received that Bible, he put aside his spear. War, killing enemies and visitors, killing anyone who was different – this had been the Torres Strait way. It was seen as normal, even right. The light of Christ showed the islanders that this is not God's way. The Torres Strait islands are now one of the most hospitable places you could visit. They still dance and sing as they have done for thousands of years, but they now greet visitors with food and singing, not spears and arrows. The light of Christ changed them.

That change in attitude to visitors is an example of the second aspect of the coming of the light of Christ. As followers of Christ, we are called to reflect his light to the world. As Jesus himself said, 'Let your light shine before others , so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

The first part of that verse from Matthew 5:16 – Let your light shine – was the motto of the Anglican school I attended in high school. It was drummed into us: Christians are to reflect the light of Christ so that others may come to know him. As teenagers, we were expected to do this by acting with compassion, by doing community work, by caring for the needy.

Reflecting the light of Christ to the world certainly means all of that, and more. We believe that, when Christ returns, he will rule with justice for all, and bring peace. Therefore, as Christians reflecting Christ's light, we are called to work for justice and peace. In the words of a hymn we often sing, but that isn't available on youtube:

Community of Christ, through whom the word must sound –

cry out for justice and for peace the whole world round.

At the moment, Torres Strait Islanders, along with Aboriginal people, are crying out for justice in our country, as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. The light of Christ is shining on our land, as it shone on Erub Island in 1871. Like Dabad, we too are called to examine our own attitudes, beliefs, and way of life in the light of Christ. What is good and right that we can keep, and what needs to be changed? What views or actions do we need to alter or reject in order to live in the light of Christ? How might we reflect that light to others? What actions should we take to bring justice to the indigenous people of our land?

These questions are both individual and communal. Each of us needs to ask, what attitudes to indigenous people do I need to bring to the light of Christ? What opinions do I need to change? How might I act to bring about change in my family, my local community, my nation?

Our individual answers may differ. But if we each seek the light of Christ honestly, if we are each willing to allow Christ to change us deeply within, and to take action for change in our nation, then we will be true bearers of the light of Christ.

Let us pray.

Grant, we pray, O Lord our God,
that as the cross shines in our southern skies,
so may Christ bring light to our nation,
to its peoples old and new,
and by saving grace, transform our lives.

Amen.