

Ephesians 5:8-14
Fourth Sunday in Lent

22.03.20

Living in the light / exposing the darkness

‘Light’: that is one of the most powerful and enduring images of our faith, one that resonates and resounds throughout the Bible. From right at the beginning, in the Book of Genesis chapter 1, when God speaks the words, ‘let there be light!’, to the coming of Jesus who declared, ‘I am the light of the world’, light and its opposite, darkness are deep symbols of the Christian faith.

And so to this morning’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where light is pitted against darkness, the sleep of the night being contrasted with the wakefulness of daytime to which we are summoned. This passage is thought to have baptismal echoes, as Paul draws on baptismal rites and liturgies that were practiced in his day. So at some point in the baptismal service the call would go out: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you!” This was a wake-up call for candidates to leave behind the shadowy, twilight world of their former selves and to rise to new resurrection life. “For once you were in darkness”, says Paul, “but now in the Lord you are light!’ Live as children of light!

Now in all these contexts light is very welcome, and comforting, while dark is malign and threatening. I want, however, to pick up on one word that recurs in our passage, a word associated with light, and a word which is somewhat more threatening and uncomfortable, and that is the word ‘expose’. Light exposes, it reveals, it lays bare. So Paul writes, ‘Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.’ And again, ‘everything exposed by the light becomes visible.’ This is part of the work of light, to expose what is dark and destructive. And that is why salvation can be unsettling and even threatening: the truth must out, as the saying goes, and it’s the light that outs it, shining into dark and hidden corners. As Jesus put it, ‘Nothing that is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore what you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the rooftops.’

Well, this morning, prompted by this reading set for today, I am going to suggest to you that this might be one way of interpreting our current crisis, the fact that here we are social-distancing (as the new phrase goes), and listening to this sermon online, and in lockdown as we face the unprecedented threat of the corona virus. I wonder if maybe one question we should be asking is, ‘what is this exposing about us?’ What is this revealing about how we live and the values we espouse – because it seems to me that there is accumulating evidence that enlightened, secular Western society has gone profoundly wrong. And every now and again there is a kind of a convulsion that reveals that deep down we are sick. So it is just 12 years since the financial crisis hit, causing chaos on the money markets and throwing economies into disarray. And in the light of what we are living through now that seems relatively tame, but of course there is also the ever-growing awareness of climate change and the recognition that whatever the complex truth about climate change is, human activity is at the very least a contributing factor and there is something profoundly wrong with a species that so ruthlessly destroys its own habitat.

So at the risk of over-simplifying, and taking me to the outer boundaries of my knowledge and understanding, I want to try to say something about how we have got to where we are today, and what I think is being exposed by the current crisis and crises. And I will come clean and acknowledge my dependence upon a book I have read recently called ‘Why Liberalism Failed’, by an American professor, Patrick Deneen. Liberalism is a word that can have many meanings but in Deneen’s analysis it is the dominant philosophy of our age, stretching back to the period from the 17th – 19th centuries that we call the Enlightenment. And how appropriate to consider the Enlightenment this morning given our text with its images of light and of waking from sleep. The fundamental call of the Enlightenment was to banish the darkness of religion and superstition and to awaken reason. For too long our reason has been asleep, as the Spanish painter Goya painted in his famous picture, *The sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. So, in a fascinating parody of St Paul, the Enlightenment was a call to reason to awake from its sleep, to banish the monsters of faith and

belief, and to live in the light! And from this there emerged the philosophy of liberalism which is now common currency in western, so-called ‘developed’ nations. And at the heart of liberalism, as the name implies, lies the concern for freedom – that fundamentally we are to be born to be free.

The enlightenment version of freedom, however, has certain distinct features. Firstly, it must reject anything that would constrain or condition us. So, for example, tradition is highly suspect, because tradition supplies us with certain givens which shape the way we live. And with the abolishing of tradition goes a disenchantment with the past: the past and the old shackle us while the new and the future liberate us. Youth displaces age. And of course God is the supreme constraint upon us and if there is a God then he must be a very hands-off God, distant from the world, for any other God would encroach upon our freedom. And central to this notion of freedom is choice: anything at all that restricts my freedom to choose is bad and anything that enhances my freedom to choose is good. And all this is deeply individualistic: my personal freedom is paramount and there is only a problem if my freedom interferes with yours – otherwise the self is sovereign and freedom is essentially freedom from others.

Then again, this notion of freedom is resistant to any boundaries. A boundary is a restriction, a limitation, and the human spirit is a pioneer, forever pushing into new territory. Every limit is a challenge to freedom. And of course this mentality puts us at odds with nature. Nature conditions us – we must master and control it. Nature limits us - and every limit must be overcome. And so this version of freedom severs us from nature and sets us over and against it. We see this in one of the first great 17th century Enlightenment thinkers, Francis Bacon, who saw nature as hiding its laws from us – they are buried deep beneath nature’s surface. And we must wrestle with nature if it is to reveal its secrets. We must coerce and violate it if we are to expose its workings, such that we can make it serve us. This is an adversarial relationship with the natural world.

So this is the notion of freedom that the Enlightenment has bequeathed us. It’s one in which individual, detached choice reigns supreme. But how do we know what are wise choices, what are good choices, especially when we cut ourselves off from tradition and religions and the accumulated, communal wisdom of the past? And on this account, where boundaries are disregarded, how are we to prevent the effects of the free, unfettered, unregulated market that produced the financial crash? And speaking of boundaries, and considering our current situation, there is some evidence that we are exposing ourselves to new and deadly viruses by our laying waste of forests and natural landscapes. As one expert on pandemics has put it: ‘We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it.’ And we might ask what on earth a bat was doing being sold for food in a crowded market in Wuhan – the presumed cause of the corona virus outbreak. What are we doing? This is what happens when freedom is viewed as the banishing of boundaries, rather than acquiring the wisdom of living within them. And of course we are now reaping the consequences of viewing as an enemy to be mastered and controlled and subjugated: we are destroyed by it even as we destroy it. Nature reveals its secrets and its benefits not when we strongarm it but when we revere it and handle it with great care.

So perhaps something is being exposed to us by this pandemic. In the words of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians the light is exposing the darkness, the folly of how we live. It’s a wake up call! And yes, the Enlightenment exposed certain corruptions and distortions of religion and tradition and that was necessary. But the Enlightenment is itself exposed as leading us into darkness when it naively exalts reason at the expense of faith and the life of the soul.

One last word, however. What is being exposed by this pandemic is not just our folly and our darkness. The light is exposing good things too. It is exposing the fact that we are connected: connected for good as well as ill. For if our connectedness causes the virus to spread so lethally it is our connectedness too that causes us to reach out to one another in support and in care. People are discovering perhaps that true freedom is not freedom from but freedom for one another. I have been moved by stories of how the vulnerable are being looked out for and cared for. We are discovering that true freedom is to be found not in detached individualism but in community. And I’ve been touched too by creative efforts people have made here in this congregation to ensure that the life of

community and fellowship and worship is maintained. And I, even I, forever at odds with technology, am discovering its value and the fact that widely dispersed people can access this service.

Many good things are being exposed. Perhaps we are learning the limits of consumption and materialism and discovering the Lent message that we do not live by bread alone. One of our elders circulated a poem written two weeks ago from which I quote as I conclude:

What if you thought of it as Sabbath –
 the most sacred of times?
 Cease from travel.
 Cease from buying and selling.
 Give up, just for now,
 on trying to make the world
 different than it is.
 Sing. Pray. Touch only those
 to whom you commit your life.
 Centre down.

The corona pandemic exposes much of our folly and darkness. But it exposes too much that we should celebrate, much of what it means to live the life of the baptised: in Paul's words, as children of the light. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
 we praise and worship you, faithful God.
 Once more you have brought us
 to the beginning of a new day, and a new week;
 once more you have brought light out of darkness,
 day out of night.
 And you call us to awaken
 and to live in the light of your love and your grace,
 in the fellowship of the risen Son.
 We praise and bless your holy name.
 Yet, Lord, we confess that we live in a shadow world,
 in self-chosen darkness, resistant to your light,
 asleep in the world of night when you call us to awake
 to the new day that has dawned in Jesus Christ.
 O Lord have mercy upon us as we confess to you our sins.
 Hear us as we pray for forgiveness...
 O gracious God,
 the light of your love penetrates every dark cloud,
 every shadow, assuring us of your faithfulness to us.
 Awaken us we pray to the new life
 that you offer to us in Jesus Christ.
 Help us, we pray, to be children of the day,
 living in the light.
 And we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ,
 and in the words he taught us, saying...

Living God,
Source of all goodness and blessing,
we recognise that times of crisis can bring out the best
and the worst in us;
they can bring out great love and care and selflessness
and they can bring out selfishness and greed and self-preoccupation.
By your grace, may the world meet this pandemic
by rising to the best of who we are and what we can be.

We pray for scientists working hard to combat this disease.
We thank you for their skill in discerning nature's secrets,
learning to work with creation to the glory of God, the Maker.
We pray for hospitals – for doctors and nurses and all support staff
as they face huge pressure on their resources.
Give strength to those who care for the sick and the vulnerable.
And we pray for governments and leaders,
for those who must make big decisions
that will effect people's welfare.
O God give them wisdom, discernment and courage.
And we pray for those who are at particular risk,
and for those who are anxious and afraid,
and for those who feel isolated and cut off:
may they know the strength and support of friends
and loved ones and of community.

O living God,
We thank you that you walk with us through every dark valley.
We praise you that your rod and staff comfort us,
that you prepare a feasts for us in the midst of our enemies.
Bless the world you love with healing.
And grant us grace to learn from this trial;
give us the courage and the motivation to change
and to make your world a better, and a more just and human place.

And now we pause for some moments of silence in which we bring to God our own particular
concerns and needs, and people who are particularly on our hearts...

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.