

Children of the light

Back in 2009 we went on a holiday to Tasmania, and naturally we visited Port Arthur. We signed up to go on the night-time Ghost Tour. We'd done it before – back in 1994, and it was good. It had changed a bit since 1994, though. The whole site had been developed – and a new visitor centre had been built following the massacre in 1996. There were also far more tourists, and each night several ghost tour groups would be lead around the site.

We arrived for the tour – which was at 9pm, because it doesn't get dark that far south until very late in the middle of summer. We joined the tour group of about 20 people, and the guide introduced herself and asked for three volunteers to carry lanterns. I volunteered – because I thought it was better to carry the light myself rather than rely on someone else.

The tour proceeded. There were no special effects or sound effects. There was no one in costume to jump out at us. Instead, the scariness came from dim lighting, and stories of convict days, and occasional shouts or stomping of feet from the guide. It was effective, though - some people in our group were too scared to go into some of the buildings.

We didn't see a single ghost, but it was all very atmospheric.

The model prison was the last stop on our tour. When we got there, the guide got me to leave my lantern on the doorstep, as a signal to the other groups that we were in there, and they had to wait until we'd finished that section of the tour.

So we toured the model prison – a good deal of history interspersed with a couple of scary stories. And then we got to the end, and stood at the other end of the prison, outside under the starry sky.

And the guide said to me “You can go back and get your lantern”.

I headed back into the prison, to collect the lantern. Alone. And the door closed behind me. I wasn't scared – at least not initially... though I was a bit worried about being able to find my way back to the lantern. But I walked ahead, one hand in front of me, into the darkness. Eventually, I found my way to where I could see the weak light of my lantern in the crack under the entry door. And as I saw that faint light, I was suddenly very aware of the immense darkness behind me. I was pretty sure there was no one – or nothing – there... but even so, it was a little daunting.

You'll be pleased to know that I got my lantern, and successfully navigated my way back to the group.

I think darkness has a way of getting to us. It gives us uncertainty. We can never be sure what the darkness is hiding. So much crime seems to happen in the darkness of night. Even people who identify as night owls, generally prefer to have a light or two on.

In our reading today from his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul talks about a light and darkness distinction: He tells the Thessalonians, and us, “But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day.””

Paul isn't talking about the light of the sun or even of lamps of his day, and certainly not of the electric lights we rely on these days. The light he talks about is the light of God. And that light is a light no darkness can possibly overcome. As followers of Jesus, we live in the light of God.

Isaiah prophesied about this light. At a time when the people of Israel were living in a time of despair and hopelessness, he proclaimed to them:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2).

That is a great expression of hope. And Isaiah talks about it not as a vague and uncertain hope for the future, but something that is certain, something that is concrete, something that the people of Israel - and us - can know today. They have seen a great light. They have lived in a land of deep darkness, but, for them, light has shined. Not *might* shine or even *will* shine – but has shined.

At the opening of his gospel, John tells us that Jesus is that light.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [...] In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. (John 1:1,4-5)

Later, in the book of Revelation, John looked forward to the completion of God’s plan for creation and for us, writing:

“And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.” (Revelation 22:5)

On that summer’s night in Port Arthur, when I was alone in the model prison, I admit I was a bit afraid of the dark. Certainly, when I was a child, I was afraid of the dark.

But even if we’re not afraid of what lurks in the darkness, we often find ourselves awake in the middle of the night, worrying. Maybe not about monsters under the bed, but about the concerns of our lives. And often, as we go over such things in the darkness of the night, they get bigger. Even if we long desperately to return to sleep, sometimes those fears don’t let us.

The night, the darkness, doesn’t last though. And in the light of day, the problems of our world don’t always cast so long of a shadow. We see them differently in the light. Just like the feeble light of that lantern in that prison in Tasmania, the light gives us confidence, and allays our fears.

“But you, beloved, are not in darkness,” Paul writes, “...you are children of light and children of the day.”

Paul writes to the Thessalonians in the context of the return of Jesus, and he tells them near the end of chapter 4 “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” (1 Thess 4:16)

That’s something that the Thessalonians expected to happen any day – and it’s something that Christians throughout the ages have expected to happen any day. Indeed, it is something that we should expect, but we cannot know when: as I said last week, Jesus made that clear, saying “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matthew 24:36)

When Paul talks about being children of the light and children of the day rather than belonging the night or to the darkness he’s talking about that in the context of waiting for Jesus return.

How do we live in the current age? We need to be living as children of the light. Not living in darkness and fear, but living in the light and hope that Jesus gives us.

While the current age has lasted a lot longer than the Thessalonians expected, Paul’s advice to them still applies.

On Tuesday, at Women's Day Fellowship I shared a reading from another of Paul's letters regarding how we should be by the Spirit, rather than by the flesh:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:19-24)

That reflects what he writes here: So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet (1 Thess 5:6-8).

Live, not as children of the flesh and night, but as children of the light.

In our reading today from Matthew's gospel, continuing the series of Jesus' parables from the last week before his crucifixion, we heard the parable about the three servants who are entrusted with managing their master's assets. He divides the funds between them, "to each according to his abilities."

Two of the servants set to work investing what's been given to them. Their investments could have failed, and they could have lost some or all of what had been given to them, but sure enough, their efforts did pay off, and each of them doubles the sum he was entrusted with.

But the third servant was different. He was scared. Scared of failure and scared of the master. Although he had received the least of all three servants, and he had, I guess, the least to lose, he didn't use it.

Fear paralyzed him. He lived in fear of retaliation – if he lost the master's money, he believed he would suffer the consequences.

What was received by the other two servants as acknowledgement of the master's confidence in them felt like doom to him.

He was a child of the darkness, and the other two were children of the light. The other two of these men lived and acted in the light of their master's grace. But the third man lived in fear and darkness.

If we are the children of God – then we walk in God's light. We have received the grace of God, poured out generously for us in the life and death of Jesus. We didn't earn it, and we don't have to pay for it – it is freely given to us. We are invited to live in that divine light – but in response we shouldn't be burying that light away, instead we need to be sharing that light with others – sharing it with the world.

We have been given, not bags of money, but generous gifts from God. We need to use them to the best of our abilities, sharing them with others, not burying them for ourselves. We are not in darkness; we are the children of light.

And Paul tells us to be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. Just as a breastplate and a helmet would protect a soldier, so the faith and love of God, and

the hope of salvation through Jesus, will protect us. In the face of darkness, in the face of all the problems of the world and our lives, the faith and love and hope is there for us.

Even in the face of darkness, the light of Jesus still shines for us.

Paul tells us that God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:9).

Jesus came to earth and lived and died for our salvation. He calls us to follow him, not only all the days of our lives, but all the way through death, into everlasting life.

Paul says that [Jesus] He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. (5:10)

There's a great line in the song 'In Christ Alone' by Keith & Kristyn Getty that reflects that idea: "No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from his hand. 'Til He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand"

Finally, Paul urges the Thessalonians to encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (5:11).

As followers of Jesus, as children of the light, we need to encourage each other. Encouragement is something that we often overlook in the busyness of life, but it is an important part of being the body of Christ – both to encourage, and to be encouraged.

I like that Paul adds "just as in fact you are doing". So often we think that Paul wrote to the churches to rebuke and correct them – to tell them how they should live and what they should be doing. Here, he encourages them, but he also acknowledges that they are doing the right thing.

So we should encourage people, and we should also acknowledge what they are doing and have done.

We light the Christ Candle in church every week to remind us of the light of Christ in our world and in our lives. We've lit it every Sunday since last Christmas, and next week, on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, we will light it again. Next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday – a feast instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1922, who noted that while there had been a cessation of hostilities after World War I, there was no true peace. He deplored the rise of class divisions and unbridled nationalism, and held that true peace can only be found under the Kingship of Christ as "Prince of Peace".

And while that is the last time this year we light the Christ Candle, his light continues to shine for us, because the Sunday after, on the first Sunday of the new church year, we light the first of our Advent Candles, as we look forward to Christmas and remembering Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but even more, we look forward to his return. And as we wait, we live in faith and love and hope, as children of the light.

Amen.