

The Coming of the Light

Sermon Notes



ANGLICAN BOARD OF MISSION
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The Coming of the Light is an important festival for the Australian church. We celebrate the activity of God in our own land and waters, and the light of Christ which shines forth from the Torres Strait and invites us into a relationship of transformation and reconciliation. Today we give thanks to God for the peoples and cultures of the Torres Strait Islands and ways they stretch our personal and collective identity.

If it has not already occurred, consider beginning the sermon with an Acknowledgement of Country.

History

In 1871, Revd Samuel McFarlane and Revd Archibald Murray of the London Missionary Society, together with eight New Caledonian mission teachers, arrived off the coast of Erub, or Darnley Island, in the far eastern Torres Strait. Their ship, the 'Surprise', anchored off Kemus Beach and lowered its boat for MacFarlane and others to go ashore. From a small hill, a warrior called Dabad was watching. He called his men to follow him and made his way down to the water's edge. McFarlane waded ashore over the volcanic rock pools. He dropped to his knees on the beach before the fearsome looking islanders – the Erubians. McFarlane grasped his Bible in both hands and thrust it towards Dabad. (McFarlane wrote later: "Never did men feel more than we did then their absolute dependence on Divine Help,") Then something remarkable happened: Dabad stayed his spear and accepted the book which he could not read but which would bring new Light, to all these warring islands This was the new era for the islands of the Torres Strait – which would be known as the Coming of the Light.

From that time in 1871 the London Missionary Society worked among the islands of the Torres Strait. Just before the outbreak of war in 1914, the Society found itself in financial difficulties. It officially approached the Anglican Bishop on Thursday Island – Gilbert White - to take over the missionary work in the Torres Strait. Bishop White was the Bishop of the vast isolated Anglican Diocese known as Carpentaria.

When Bishop Gilbert White took over the responsibility of preaching the Gospel to the Torres Strait people, he set out on a visitation to the important islands in the Strait to meet his new flock. He kept a Journal of this memorable journey and published it under the title "Round about the Torres Straits." - In some respects, it reads rather like one of St Paul's journeys.

<http://anglicanhistory.org/aus/torres/white/06.html>

On 20 May 1908, the Queensland Government formally gazetted 500 acres as a reserve for the benefit of South Sea Islander people on the eastern side of Moa Island. The Anglican Church founded a mission specifically for South Sea Islander families on the reserve land at Moa Island. At the time, the Anglican Church also ran a South Sea Islanders' Home on Thursday Island. The new mission was named St Paul's, after the cathedral in London. The first missionary appointed to St Paul's was Deaconess Florence Buchanan. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/buchanan-florence-griffiths-5412>

When the handover from LMS to the Church of England was completed, Bishop White decided to establish a theological college at St Paul's Mission on Moa Island. In 1919 the ordination of the first Torres Strait Islander clergy took place when Revd Joseph Lui and Revd Poey Passi were made deacons by Bishop Henry Newton.

Perspectives

When the LMS missionaries arrived on the beach on Erub (Darnley Island) it is understood that God was on both sides of the beach – with the London Missionary Society missionaries, and also with the chief Dabad who received the missionaries in peace. Between both the missionaries and the people of Erub the light was received, and the culture of the people of the Torres Strait enlightened by the light of Christ. Culture was not destroyed by the light but raised by the light.

The Right Revd Dr Keith Joseph, Anglican Diocese of North Queensland

I was born a Torres Strait Islander person - that makes up who I am, my Identity. Becoming a Christian enhanced who I am. I have the best of my Christian faith and my culture!

...We are not going to leave our culture and languages at the door of the church.

Our economic status is below the national average, but we don't let that stop us. There will come a time when Light which came through the Torres Strait will filter out to the national church.

Light came, Light continues to come, and the Light will continue to shine ... I am a Coming of the Light person!

Revd Canon Victor Joseph, Principal, Wontulp-Bi-Buya College

The chiefs used a word which meant 'no more bloodshed' we will not kill these people; they are bringing something – something we need to learn. What is it? We will get them to tell us... one of the things that happened then was that the warfare stopped.

Our people already knew the gospel in a different way, with the environment, the ocean, the seas, the current, the waters, the sky, the moon... They were bringing the light to us, and we were bringing the light to them.

If you want to understand what we can contribute to the whole understanding of the church, why don't you get on a plane, come up to my home and walk in the sea – take your shoes off- get the feel of the salt water, go swimming, dive – have a look under the ocean, look up at the skies. Come up in the monsoon season where you can see the wild wind, the wild seas, the roaring – is not God speaking? Then you will know God's presence in the Torres Strait!

Aunty Rose Elu, 2021 QLD Senior Australian of the Year

Theology and Application

Lectionary Readings:

Coming of The Light

Isaiah 58. 8-11

Psalm 27

2 Corinthians 4. 5-6

John 12. 35-47

"The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail."

Isaiah 58. 11

The Isaiah reading set for the Coming of The Light celebrations speaks of liberation, joy, radiant light in darkness, and water refreshing parched places. It captures the spirit of the Coming of the Light, a festival of joy and refreshment for the people of the Torres Strait, and by invitation, the rest of the country.

God has always walked with the people of the Torres Strait, since time immemorial. What is celebrated in the Coming of the Light is the arrival of the gospel, proclaimed so beautifully in the words of John's gospel set for today, that as we believe in the light, we become "children of light".

Who are the light bearers in your life? Who are the people that show you what God is like? Do you feel overwhelmed by the light and liberation of God in worship?

There is a song that is sung by the community of Wontulp-Bi-Buya college that is overwhelmingly joyful, "We're gonna walk, walk, walk in the light..." The whole community joins in dancing and singing, many Aboriginal and Islander cultures come together in unity to sing a song that speaks of how these communities live in their daily life – in the joy of the spirit, offering hospitality, despite the many challenges that are faced, due to systemic racism, climate change, and remote living.

In recent history, and present times, the Anglican church has faced some dark times - the royal commission, our involvement complicity in the colonisation of First Nations peoples, the over representation of Anglicans in domestic and family violence statistics, theological in-fighting, and the threat of division on a national scale. We need light, we yearn for the refreshing waters, the spring of water that Isaiah proclaims.

There is hope, and this hope is celebrated in the Coming of the Light. Where God was on both sides of the beach - the Spirit in the people of the Torres Strait met with the Spirit in the people coming on that ship, Surprise, and community was built, light was shared. Now, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Coming of Light, reminding ourselves that we are "Children of Light".

The church in the Torres Strait is part of our church's hope, it is time for us to be "*missioned to*" [a phrase used by the Revd Canon Victor Joseph, Principal of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, Cairns]. This will require a letting go of power and an opening of heart, to receive the light of new ways of thinking

about God, new ways of doing worship, new ways of living gently upon earth as we will listen to the First Nations peoples of this place. And it can bring healing to our church, a church that can truly be rooted in the cultures, land, and waters of this place we call Australia.

LEARNING IS AN ACT OF MISSION.

What can we do now to build Missional friendship between cultures and people groups?

As evidenced through the interviews in the ABM 'God Was On Both Sides Of The Beach' study series, Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people of mission may well be willing to help us recognise our own darkness. They, having experienced the 'Coming of the Light', having encountered the Gospel, have courageously and quickly recognised and rejected areas of darkness within their own cultures. If we are receptive, they might well lead us to remember that cultural darkness is an ever-present reality in every society, and one we must identify and reject daily.

The trouble we face is that many of us are, consciously or unconsciously, part of a 'success' culture. Our culture has – in the past - won the culture wars and ruthlessly conquered those we once, so ignorantly, called 'lesser' or primitive cultures. We have, for too long, assumed that our way of life, our way of doing church and our reading of scripture is the 'right' way.

Of course, many of us are now troubled by the clear and obvious failure of that vision. We have seen the collapse in church attendance and the decline in faith in the Western world - but our lack of willingness to re-evaluate our 'rightness' seems to suggest that it is safer to stick to this old and failing idea than to make ourselves vulnerable to a sense of cultural or spiritual insecurity. But is it safer? Is it faithful to cling to what served us once? When we have 'missioned to' other cultures, we have simply assumed that they will change, they can change and they want to change. We have expected this of Indigenous cultures the world over. We, largely white, materialist and militaristic cultures, brought the Gospel – and with it, our way of behaving and living - and therefore the expectation has been that, with minimal struggle, 'First Peoples' will change and accept our rightness.

In a movement that might be deeply unsettling for us, Indigenous peoples are now turning the tables and asking us to submit our cultural 'norms' to the light of the Gospel. The Gospel that they have embraced and understood – perhaps better than – or at least differently to - many of us. What First Nations people might be asking of us now, is that we show the same courage that they have shown. That we show the courage to deeply examine what is broken in our lives, our churches, our communities and our families – and to renew our faith in God's "now but not yet" kingdom. We are being asked to recognise that a new dawn for the church will not simply be the refreshment of what is familiar – will not be a going back to what was - but instead, is an existential challenge to bring what we have and who we are to the forensic scrutiny and life-giving affirmation of the Light of Christ.

The Coming of the Light is coming to us. Perhaps that is the only way. To allow the Light to keep coming at us and revealing the way forward.

The Coming of the Light was always going to be a reciprocal process. The missionaries who brought the Gospel to the Torres Strait were the vessel of God's grace – but they were not the Light. And, as we have heard, God was on both sides of the beach in those days. What God has already been doing with the peoples of the Torres Strait was about to be enlightened by the Gospel. The best of what God had already done remained, but the darkness that existed was to be shed – and fled from.

What has emerged from that is a deep, culturally enriched Christianity that is now hoping to be the vessel of the Light back into mainstream Australian church culture.

Are we willing to listen? To hear. To respond. To change. In the way we have asked others to do. Will we take this potential gift of grace seriously enough to alter the way we respond to God? Can our parishes, dioceses and structures show that we are willing to receive from those we once gave to?

Are we willing to learn what it means to throw open the doors and let the Light of the Gospel examine, challenge, and renew us?

What the courageous people who spoke as part of the ABM Lent studies are suggesting, is that the present-day outcomes of the Coming of the Light to the Torres Strait, some 150 years ago, is now offering a chance to learn about what it means to be an authentically Australian church, to be culturally Christian in a new way – and to recognise that we are not separate tribes, but together, are children of the One Light.

As a church, we need to recognise that we have been part of a culture that has denied the wisdom and agency of First Nations people throughout the history of colonisation. We have been slow and unwilling to listen to the voices – black voices - of Christian people who have understood and lived with the land for millennia.

It is only when ordinary Anglicans in ordinary parishes can humbly accept that God has blessed, is blessing and will bless the whole church through Indigenous voices - it is only then that we will be able to renew our understanding of what being an authentically Australian Church might truly mean.

Contemporary developments

As a part of amplifying this voice and celebrating the church in the Torres Strait the Diocese of North QLD passed resolutions at its recent Synod to support the creation of both the “Meriba Maygi Zageh Anglican Council”, translated as “Our Holy Work”, and the “North Queensland Aboriginal Anglican Council”. These councils are one way of ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministries have autonomy over decision making and governance, whilst still being important members of the Diocese of North QLD, and the national Anglican church.

Separately, in 2020 Anglicans in the Torres Strait welcomed the establishment of a new Melanesian Brothers Household on Thursday Island. The Brothers aim to live the Gospel in a direct and simple way, following Christ’s example of prayer, mission and service. They live alongside the people they are serving, respecting their traditions and customs. The Brothers follow a daily cycle of prayer and daily Eucharist and they take vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience with many serving between seven and 20 years. Some take life vows. They not only offer spiritual teaching but also practical assistance. They plant, harvest, fish, build, eat and share with everyone in their care.

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