

Australia Day - Sunday 26 January 2014

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Matthew 4: 12-23 Walking in Darkness

I suppose every family has a favourite uncle or aunt or some other relative. In my family the favourite is an uncle who at the age of 99 is the only surviving member of his original family of six children. He was the third born. He is a cheery soul who is a delight to talk with. He is up to date with the latest politics of both church and state. Until today he has been living by himself in his own home –the home in which he and my aunt raised their family. She died some 20 years ago. Today he reluctantly moves into a nursing home but with good grace having survived a serious fall last year.

Other than his age, what is truly remarkable about my uncle is that after playing the organ faithfully for worship since he was a very young man, he finally stopped about 15 years ago because of macular degeneration. For the past 10 years he has been blind. He has been living and walking in darkness all that time, fending for himself, enjoying life in his limited capacity and causing untold concern for his children.

“The people who sat in the dark saw a great light. Light dawned on those who sat in the shadowy land of death.” quotes Matthew from the prophet Isaiah as the background for the beginning of Jesus ministry.

According to Matthew, Jesus left his home in Nazareth when John was seized and went to live in Capernaum in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. It was an industrious area with the Sea of Galilee its centre. This part of the Jewish homeland was a hot bed of political unrest and had fared badly during the occupations of various political powers including the Roman Empire.

You could say, many young men in the area were political activists. Their prayers for the coming of God's kingdom were matched with their willingness to make it happen. They wanted the reign of God established which would mean as God's people, they would be in charge of their nation with a ruler like the legendary King David, not the hated Romans. They wanted peace to practice their religion and be a proud nation and were prepared to fight for it. For too long, they believed, the people had walked and sat in the darkness of foreign occupation.

Into this region comes Jesus. His message is “Repent”. “The kingdom of heaven is coming.” The kingdom of heaven is another way of saying the Kingdom of God without using God’s name. Jewish people never say the name of God out of respect.

“Repent,” he says. In other words, change the way you do things, change the way you see the world, turn around and do things differently. It would seem that Jesus understood all too clearly where things were headed if people continued to walk in the darkness of violence and hatred. He came proclaiming a different kingdom – a kingdom where the ways of God’s peace, God’s Shalom would rule. For Matthew, Jesus was the light bringing hope and salvation foretold by the prophets.

There were some who heard and responded to his message. Leaving to our imagination all the details of his encounter with the fishermen, Matthew tells us that Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John also brothers, left what would have been a lucrative fishing business and the means of support for their families, to join Jesus in his preaching and healing ministry.

We are not told what they thought before they met Jesus, only that they responded to his call to change from being in the fishing business to being in the people business. “I will make you fish for people.” A loose paraphrase could be: “I will make you change your ways as I teach, and heal. I will make you see that the kingdom of heaven is the only way to peace and hope. People are walking in darkness and darkness will end in death. Come with me, follow me and you will see what life with God can really mean.”

Walking in darkness..... Sometimes walking in darkness cannot be avoided as in the case of my uncle. And I am sure you all know stories of people who have faced this challenge with courage and who have managed their disability with some success. In one congregation I was part of, there was a young woman who had been blind from birth. Her sense of hearing was acute but best of all, she was loved for her courage in taking her turn on the Bible reading roster. Her Braille Bible was a treasured possession. Her reading from it was beautiful.

For others, the darkness that is experienced arises from depression, addiction or mental illness or perhaps from grief and often from fear.

Matthew began our reading by saying that the people of God walk in darkness and I want to ask - are the people of God walking in darkness again? Despite the

assurance that the light has dawned in Christ, is the church of God walking in darkness? Is the darkness of our own making or has it been imposed upon us?

My question has come from some lively discussion among theologians and ministers as this new year has begun, about the decline of mainstream Christian churches including our own Uniting Church in Australia, America, New Zealand and other western countries.

One Uniting Church theologian suggests that, ironically the seeds of demise may well lie in the success the church has experienced in the past, especially in those so called golden post war years when churches were flourishing. How often do we look back to those years and want to recapture them in the hope that people will continue to come? But people are not coming.

People no longer come and fill the pews, not because congregations are less welcoming or generous or because people are less spiritual in many cases. Yes there is a general apathy towards the church. But it seems to me there is a wide variety of reasons people do not come including the sad fact that the message of Christian church has been compromised by poor behaviour and abuse of pastoral trust.

For many, Christianity is not relevant.

Furthermore, there is a greater range of religious choices these days. What was once only provided by the church such as children's programs and youth groups, is now widely available through many other organizations.

The way people work has changed as have the hours they work.

The way we communicate has changed.....

The world has changed.

But has the church changed?

I believe it is has not. I believe many of God's people now walk in darkness, perhaps fearing change, perhaps not knowing what to do. Whilst they remain in their safe place, continue to worship as they traditionally have done, they can still function. Like my uncle they can still pour our cups of tea, but they are struggling to fill the rosters, they struggle just to just keep going.

Today's gospel reading reminds us that Jesus is our light – he is our hope and salvation and it also reminds us that our core mission is not keeping our buildings open and maintaining beautiful Sunday morning worships services.

Our core mission as his followers is to keep alive the message of the good news – the kingdom of God is at hand, found in the way of Jesus. He called and inspired a few ordinary people to learn about God’s way which stands in opposition to the world’s way. He taught them about the priority of relationship with him and each other and the modelling of that relationship with others as their number grew. He didn’t ask them to believe he was anything special but that belief grew as their relationship with him intensified. Eventually, these ordinary fisherman became convinced that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Their experience of the Risen Christ made them fishers of people.

It is no different for us today. When we get back to the core, the heart of the gospel, it is Jesus and the reign of God. When we let this truth be our guiding light, we cannot walk in darkness.

Yet shadows quickly fall when we get side-tracked with worries about survival, or when keeping ourselves in our comfort zone becomes our preferred way of being,

or as we let mission be confined to people like ourselves.

So here too is a timely reminder for us as we celebrate Australia Day. The dark shadows of racism, xenophobia, alcohol fuelled violence and more that have in the past fallen and currently fall across our land, cannot and will not exist in the light of Christ. And we are the light-bearers, the bearers of the good news, the agents of God’s love.

My uncle has had to leave the security of his life-long home to begin a new life; the fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John had to let go of all that had sustained and nourished them in the past to answer the call of Jesus to follow him into the future;

we too may have to let go of all that is familiar – our traditional Sunday worship, our ways of being church inherited from the golden age and do whatever it takes – to follow Jesus into largely unknown and untried ways of fishing for people.

May the light of Christ’s love and peace shine in us and through us, may we have the courage to dispel the darkness with love and may our strength come from the promise that God is with us and will stay with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus the Christ, our light and salvation. Amen.

