

**Lent 4
14/2021**

Mark the Evangelist

**Job 24:1-17
Psalm 107
John 3:14-21**

Jesus, the dark light of the world

In a sentence

Moral righteousness can only limit and deny; God's righteousness heals and creates.

The news has lately been filled with allegations of sexual harassment and abuse even within the highest house in the land. These reports are sad additions to the many horrific stories we have heard over the last few years. Victims – typically victims of powerful men – have begun to find their voice and, in the main, these voices are surely to be believed.

In all of this, we hear an echo of Job's complaint about the way of the unjust in the world: the thief, the murderer, the abuser and the powerful act under cover of darkness: 'deep darkness is morning to all of them; for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness' (24.17). The darkness, of course, extends beyond the dark of night. It can be behind the locked door of the school counsellor's office or beyond the barbed wire of the concentration camp. It can be a detention centre on a distant island or mere social convention: the darkness which is our hesitation to talk openly about certain things.

The more recent voicing of Job's complaint has led to increasingly loud calls for inquiries and commissions and investigations, has led to the demand for *light*. Strong and bright daylight is to be brought to bear to reveal what has been done in the dark, and by whom.

Such a seeking of light is not new to us. In the last generation, we have sought light via a significant inquiry into the separation of indigenous children from their families, royal commissions into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, into trade union governance and corruption, into child protection and youth detention, into banking and financial service, into aged care quality and safety, and into the exploitation of people with disability. And an inquiry into wrongs against Aboriginal people in Victoria is about to begin.

Not to put too fine a point on all this, we are experiencing a radical disruption: an exposure of works wrought in darkness which challenges assumptions about how the world does or should work. And many of us find ourselves blinking against the sudden light.

In our reading from John this morning, Jesus uses light and darkness to characterise the contexts within which people live and act:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Yet John's account of light and darkness in his Gospel goes beyond the necessary but merely *moral* illumination of our formal investigations and commissions into the dark places in our midst. For the Gospel, light is not quite the 'answer' to darkness, not its *moral* opposite.

In the opening verses of John's Gospel, we hear of the coming into the world of a light which the darkness does not overcome, extinguish or comprehend (1.4f). Yet, it not as straightforward as might first seem, to say that the light is not overcome.

We are to understand, of course, that the light is Jesus, which becomes more explicit later in the gospel (John 8.12; cf. also John 9 and the theme of blindness). But what are we make of the *crucifixion*? Does the darkness – if ever so briefly – overcome the light at this point? The easy answer is, Yes. We might imagine Jesus to be like one of those trick candles which, once blown out, flickers back after a couple of seconds. The darkness pulls Jesus under, so to speak, but he holds his breath and wriggles free and resurfaces. The overcoming of the light here is only fleeting and so, perhaps, doesn't count.

But John would push us deeper here. At the beginning of our Gospel reading today, Jesus invokes an old story from Israel's history about a bronze serpent lifted high on a pole as a sign by which people might be saved. The details needn't bother us here today except that Jesus now likens himself to that serpent and its saving powers. The 'lifting up' of Jesus now, however, refers to the *crucifixion* and yet not only the crucifixion. Several times in John's Gospel, the phrase 'lifted up' is used to denote both the cross and a flag-waving social, political and religious elevation – a kind of *enthronement* (cf. 8.28, 12.31ff). These two types of 'lifting up' coincide in the one moment: Jesus is 'enthroned' on the cross.

To jump a couple of steps and to compress into a single statement what this means for Jesus as the light, we might say that Jesus *becomes* the light *in the crucifixion*. The light which is Jesus and the darkness of the cross cannot be simply – morally – separated. The light which is Jesus is not merely 'against' the darkness. It is a 'dark' light, a light shining out of the dark cross. The darkness does not – even in the crucifixion – extinguish the light because the crucifixion is the light *claiming* the darkness, not so much washing it away as 'un-darking' it, putting it to work now not as darkness but as light.

Contrast this now with the necessary but *merely moral* work unfolding in the – entirely justifiable – outrage around us. Our exposés and inquiries and investigative commissions are in defence of those who, we might say, have been crucified by powers exercised in darkness. It doesn't go too far to characterise the sexual harassment of a subordinate in this way, or the bloody backblock decimation of indigenous communities. Crucifixion was no mere execution. It was precisely about dislodging someone from their own self-perception into our own perception of them and does not require wood or nails to be effected.

But, as important as it is that we illuminate the dynamics of power and the real abuse which happens in our midst, identifying the crucified Jesus as the light of the world reveals something quite different from what can be revealed by the floodlights of moral outrage.

The moral light will reveal fault. It will reveal where power lies, who has it, how they have abused it. The moral light, however, can only condemn, demand restitution and regulate the lighting of more lamps so that the dark can't provide cover again, at least in that place.

The dark light of the gospel doesn't do this. The bright light of our justice brings condemnation but the dark light of the gospel does not: 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3.17). The dark light of the gospel is concerned not with the dark but with what people do in it. It is concerned with the reality that we find the dark 'useful,' and with our capacity to seek out and create dark places. The light of the world ends up on the cross, and this is the *judgement of the world*: that darkness prevails among us. Moral indignation will not overcome this, whatever real good it might do for those subject to the darkness of others.

The light on the cross never leaves the darkness of the cross behind. The saviour – even risen from the dead – is always the *Crucified One*, always a dark light: a light which shines *from dark things*. God does not banish the darkness but *works it into light*. Like the bush in the old story, the cross burns with brilliant light but is not consumed; this light is always 'crosslight'.

And so, crucified and risen, Jesus is the light of the world, not as a *threat* to dark places but their *hope*. The promise is not of a world morally erased, of persons morally cancelled, but of hearts transformed.

Put differently, we could say that, whatever else heaven might be, it is populated with agile cripples, the seeing blind, the rich poor, forgiving victims, forgiven perpetrators, holy blasphemers: all, in their own particular way, illuminated darkness, the risen dead. What is dark, debilitating, discriminatory, diseased and deathly – whatever marks us as victims or perpetrators – these things are the nothingness out of which God creates, the grave out of which God resurrects.

This is the word of the cross, its foolish wisdom, its strong weakness, its scandal – its *moral scandal*. Our developing culture of cancellation is the sign that *we* cannot create out of nothing, bring life out of death. The light which is the cross is the sign that *God* can.

And more than *can*; God *will* create us.

For if the darkness of the cross is our *own* darkness – if it is, as we considered last time, we-in-Job who are crucified – then so also is the light of the cross our own: the light which God will make us to be.

It is in this light that we are to work, to live and to love: eyes being opened to the darkness, and looking to see it transformed by the grace of God.
