

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The light [which] will win

ForeWord

“Light will win”

Last week, many around the country observed a National Day of Mourning in response to the terrorist shootings at Bondi just before Christmas. The theme of the day, proposed by the Chabad community which suffered the attack, was “Light will win”.

This is surely a profound assertion. It is a statement of extraordinary scope: that the long arc of the moral universe bends towards justice (M L King, Jnr). It is, indeed, a god-sized declaration and so a very difficult one. The problem is this: what is the light we imagine will shine through here? And what is the darkness over against which this light will prevail? Perhaps this seems obvious. The darkness is precisely that manifest in the murderous intent of terrorists. And the light is what prevailed before the darkness arrived.

We see this understanding operating in the [Prime Minister’s statement](#), made a month after the attack. The scene is set: The attack took place in an “iconic” spot in our “beautiful” country, with babies and their “doting grandparents” present. In response to the danger and tragedy was the “valour” and “remarkable, selfless courage” of the responders. The tragedy is cast as a “stern test of our national character”, in response to which test light shone forth in cooperation and mutual care.

This is all true, of course – the contrast of a community festival by the beach with the screams of terror, the contrast of the bravery of unarmed people against the violence of armed men. We recognise what the Prime Minister grasps after here.

But the problem is the PM’s confidence that he knows what the light is, that the light was shining brightly before the gunman struck, and that it will shine again, and all the more brightly for what the government intends to do in response to the disaster.

Australia Felix – happy, fortunate, iconic, beautiful, relaxed Australia – is *Australia Lux*, Australia the Light.

Darker lights

Thinking this way, we risk playing into a deep sentimentalism in our response to crises like this, which shake our easy confidence that things are OK, that we are safe. Sentimentalism is the failure, or even the refusal, to see the bigger picture.

The idyllic scene of families coming together for a communal celebration is one with which we are all very familiar, and so its disruption with the sound of guns and screams of distress is a horror the rest of us might just be able to begin to grasp. But there are other things going on in the world behind what we see, and in darker corners of Australia the Light. Today, the Sunday before Australia Day, has for a few years now been designated by the Uniting Church as a Day of Mourning. This is in recognition that all the light most of us see around us shines within the darkness of the process and the continuing impact of the colonisation of this land. Our inability, at a national level, to hold this tension was indicated in the Referendum a couple of years ago. Did we not tell ourselves then, sentimentally, “Don’t mention the war(s)”? And we could list any

number of other moral contradictions at play, in our political, economic and personal lives, outshone by whatever light we prefer to see.

To acknowledge the darkness in our light, of course, is not intended in any way to diminish the horror or the suffering of those targeted at Bondi or who had to respond to the catastrophe. The issue here is not whether that attack was darkness. The question is, What is the light? And what could it mean to say that “light will win”? The kind of analysis the Prime Minister has offered has to do with a faint, dim light – the light to which our eyes are already accustomed. We need more than that.

To think about all this differently, we’ll turn now to St Paul and what he had to say to the Corinthian church, a community pretty sure it knew what the light was, and against which knowledge Paul wrote in his letters to them.

(Today's reading is actually from next week's lectionary readings; I wasn't paying enough attention when I began preparation this week and started working on them before I realised. I don't think God will mind too much, and I hope you won't either!)

As you listen to what Paul writes, note what he says about strength and weakness, wisdom and foolishness, and the importance he places on these contrasts for understanding God’s work in the crucified Christ.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: 1 Corinthians 1. 18-31)

Word: Proclamation

Filtered light

In what we’ve just heard, Paul is at pains to emphasise that if, viewing the cross, we look for power, we see weakness; if we look for wisdom, we see foolishness. Or to connect this to what we’ve just been considering, to see Christ crucified is not to see anything that looks like light.

And this, Paul asserts, is the way into understanding the order of things with this God. To look at the crucified Christ is to see not light but something rather more like darkness. Or, at least, this is what it seems when we bring *our* understanding of strength and wisdom to bear on what happens on the cross.

The Prime Minister’s statement on the events at Bondi speaks of the light we seek in terms of our wisdom and strength when confronted by darkness. Such things matter, of course, but they are not yet “light”. Paul would happily assert that “light will win”, but his sense for the light comes from the experience of God in the cross: *the cross* is the light which will win.

The crisis at Corinth was one of communal division. “*We see the light*” was not the literal slogan of the various parties against each other, but it sums up the dynamic pretty well. This misplaced confidence led to jealousy and competition, sexual immorality and the exclusion of the poor. The light perceived by each party was such that they could not see each other.

I spoke earlier of a “dim” light, but the intensity is not quite the point. A better metaphor is that of coloured glass, which stops us from seeing things as they “properly” are in clear, white light. To declare that “light will win” – if we mean it seriously – is to say that there will be a time when there are no more filters, a time when – as Paul says elsewhere (1 Corinthians 13) – we will see not as in a glass, darkly, but as God sees us.

If we mean seriously that “light will win”, it becomes now rather an uncomfortable proclamation. Not seeing some things because they’ve been filtered out can be pretty convenient. Or, to put it differently, a little darkness can go a long way. It does not go too far to say that, while we spend a great deal tending to our fear of the dark with laws and security measures of all sorts, we fear just as much the bright and clear light.

And this is why Paul insists that the cross be at the centre of our understanding of God and of ourselves. Our light – the light by which we think we see: our strength and wisdom – is filtered. We see, but we don’t see enough. This means that, if we were to depend solely on what we see, we would soon be lost. When Paul joins God to the crucified, he joins God to one who has no light, no power, no wisdom. *And yet*, this one – the crucified – is claimed to be the closest to God. God views and values outside of our own measurings.

In this way, Paul sees our humanity not as on a spectrum, along which we are each placed somewhere between dark and light, for condemnation or praise. Before God, we are not distinguished by strength or weakness, by wisdom or foolishness. Whatever power or effectiveness there is in the crucified Jesus, it doesn’t correspond to wisdom or strength or light. Jesus’ value is simply in God’s claiming of him despite all his apparent emptiness.

The God who sees in the dark

The bad news here is that we get light – rightness – wrong. But the good news is that God can see in the dark. And it is God’s capacity to see – God’s gaze – which is Jesus’ value, and ours. For what God sees is *us*, groping around, trying to feel our way to safety, or perhaps even hiding in the dark, thinking we can’t be seen. And God’s response is...mercy. Because what is our helplessness and fear, compared to the nothingness of the cross, which God has already blessed?

The Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard said something which can be paraphrased like this: “O, the blessed assurance of knowing that, before God, I am always in the wrong”. As pessimistic as that sounds, it is in fact profoundly liberating, because it restates just what Paul has said: your wholeness, your value, is not your own sense of righteousness but God’s determination to count you right. We are not what we see by our own light, for better or for worse. We are not our own judges. By the grace of God, we are more valuable than even we sometimes imagine.

This is not to say that we don’t do anything in response to the darkness, that we don’t act to make safe or to limit danger when we see it. We don’t dismiss outright any fault in ourselves or others; mercy is only mercy where there is fault identified and acknowledged.

But Paul’s identification of God with the cross relieves us of the temptation to judge, whether to accuse others or to defend ourselves. The cross opens us to light we cannot see.

And so the light which will win doesn’t radiate from some vision of our perfect selves, to which we are already closely aligned. The light which will win will burn more brightly than we imagine. And, just because of this, it will reveal to us things we might not want to see. The light which will win will expose things about *Australia Felix* and the felicity of our individual lives that will be painful and costly.

But anything less than such truth-telling under bright light would just be a program for more of the same: more injustice, frustration, violence and tragedy. The light will have won when we confirm that we have no light of our own, nothing according to which we

can properly boast before God or each other, and so when we have begun to live with a humility, openness and love that doesn't measure others but serves them.

God deals with us not according to how strong or wise or enlightened we imagine ourselves to be.

God deals with us according to a different light – a light which does not draw assuring distinctions but is love for one, and love for all.

This is how God has dealt with us; let us deal with each other in the same way, that the light might indeed win.
