

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

Matthew 5:13-20

A Light on the Hill

Sermon preached by Daniel Broadstock

Last year, as part of a trip to France and Italy, my wife and I spent the best part of a week in Paris. Known traditionally as ‘the City of Light’ – I was ready for quite a dazzling experience.

Now, while the centre of Paris is immensely charming, and the Eiffel Tower does glitter very prettily in the sky at night, I confess I didn’t find Paris to be especially luminous in comparison to the other modern cities I have visited. The streets are lit with the same warm light that I can find in the alleyways of Melbourne.

It may well be now that the younger, scrappier, neon cities of South East Asia can lay claim to being ‘Cities of Light.’

I have since discovered that Paris’ designation as the ‘City of Light’ of course predates the global electrification that has illuminated the world in the last fifty years. Originating in the Enlightenment, of which Paris was a cultural centre, the title gained extra currency when the city became an early adoptee of 50,000 gas streetlights in the 1820s, and then further with the advance of electrical street lighting in the late 19th century. Visitors from France’s interior and from elsewhere in Europe could be genuinely amazed by a gleaming city of fireflies that never went out. We underestimate the extent to which we are the beneficiaries of a revolution of light.

Yes, Paris gained its nickname in a much darker world.

Jesus’ world was a darker world, still.

Not dark in the intellectual, cultural, or moral sense. The ancients still have a good deal to teach us about how to think and reason, but dark in the literal sense.

Creating light in the imperial dominion of Judea was an expensive and laborious act. It required firewood or oil, and had to be tended, fed, monitored, and maintained. Public light was far less common. Cities streets were dark, shadowy places. Rural highways were lit only by the moon. Light and heat were jealously guarded, protected, and consumed. The movement of torches upon the street giving sign of armed Roman patrols.

A darker world is a more dangerous world. Crime flourishes under darkness, as does corruption. Darkness shrouds perception and conceals all manner of sins. In the darkness it is all too easy to lose your way. Light here is a precious commodity, a necessary precondition of truth, safety, and freedom. Darkness impedes my travel, my study. It exposes me to danger. It enables my enemies to move undetected around me.

How much more urgently attractive then, must Jesus’ command have been that we be people of light. That we be the light of the world. The light, the city on the hill. That we uncover the light that we have, concealed beneath a bushel, that we release it, that it may become a public light, a public good, that others may follow to find their way.

In a dark world, literally and figuratively, says Jesus, be a light.

I wonder what comes to mind, when you think of that bright city, that light upon the hill. It sounds very grand, very momentous. It stands, solid and gleaming, like a bulwark against the world.

I'm conscious that, in our particular Australian context, the light on the hill is not always a benign phenomenon. Sometimes the light on the hill is bushfire.

We've allowed too many people to experience the light of Christianity as bushfire. As something dry, destructive, and violent. One glimpse of it and they are testing the direction of the wind, and getting out their evacuation plan.

It seems to me the United States, who had also taken the city on the hill as a seminal image of its national identity, has made a terrible parody of this in itself. In many parts of the world, the light of America's coming is the light of the bomb, and the promise of American liberty is regarded as a contemptuous irony. It's not enough to cast a light - a bushfire casts a great light, as does a detonation, as does a mob with torches and pitchforks.

The prophet Isaiah, while not rooted in the same context, seems cognizant of this same danger. The context for this prophetic word is the abandonment of the exile. Shocked into repentance by the catastrophe that had befallen them in the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish people adopted a series of fasting practices to atone for the sin and weakness that had brought down such a calamity upon their heads.

But spiritual practices can all too easily disguise a complacency. For him, to be people of light can only be founded in the fire of justice:

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

What good is spiritual practice that is not oriented towards mercy and liberation. It is no more than a growling belly. An empty play of devotion.

For Isaiah, the work of justice is light's fuel in a dark world. Heap together the materials of justice, the fuel of justice, and the greater the fire you will burn. Heap together the fuels of liberation, and the fire you burn will be a clean one, incinerating chains, burning away debris, and casting light in dark places. You will shine like the noonday.

I was listening this week to the Christian prayer and meditation app, Lectio 365, and on one occasion they took an opportunity to commemorate the anniversary of the actions of the Civil Rights leader Rosa Parks. But in doing so, they gave an important warning:

Rosa Parks was an ordinary, everyday person who just needed a seat on a bus. It is vital, they said, that we hold on to the ordinariness of people like Rosa Parks. If once we allow them to be mythologised, to be elevated beyond the normal, mortal plane, we strip them of their power. It is only because Rosa Parks is ordinary that she matters. Because if Rosa Parks can do it, then I can do it. If Rosa Parks can make this fast, this fast to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, then it is also within my power to make this fast. Rosa Parks does not possess some God-given uniqueness that excuses me from following her example, or from taking my lead from any ordinary act of justice that I am witness to in the world.

The light of sainthood, the glow of Isaiah's fire is cast from ordinary candles. Just plain wax. It was only because the darkness around Rosa Parks was so deep that her little light shone such a great distance.

Above all, of course, Jesus is the light of the world. His light shines in the darkest places, in the desolation and hopelessness of the cross, in the abyss of state violence and terror, in the shadow of mob violence and vengeance and petty vanity. In the pit of failure and disaster. The city that Jesus builds is on the hill of Calvary.

And that is why the resurrection is so dazzling, because the eye that is accustomed to darkness is always blinded by a sudden great light.

We don't have to have any unique gifts. Rosa Parks didn't. We don't have to be a lighthouse, towering over the landscape. We need only be a campfire – a place of warmth, safety, and welcome, that pushes back the boundary of the darkness, that lights the way, that offers a place for other travellers to sit and rest.
