

Sunday 5 January, 2020

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Feast of the Epiphany 2020.

Readings: [Isaiah 60.1-6](#), [Ephesians 3.1-12](#), [Matthew 2.1-12](#)

For the past week, much of our state has been covered under a dark shroud of smoke. In those areas of our state in which the fires are actively burning, the smoke is tinted red. In some places the sun is hardly visible. The natural disasters that are affecting our nation have turned the bright summer sun blood-red. In some parts of our state the smoke has obscured the sun. Even here, in the heart of our state, miles away from any fires, the sky is overcast with smoke haze. There are people in our state who literally inhabit the image of which the prophet Isaiah in our first lesson speaks: 'darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples'. As the fires burn in our state, there are people who experience the physical darkness of thick smoke clouds cutting out the sunlight. And there are people who experience an inner darkness, as they are confronted with personal loss and danger, or the stories of loss and danger of others. As the fires burn, Isaiah's vision seemingly has come to life in our own nation, and we find ourselves like people sitting in darkness waiting desperately for the gentle, gracious light of God to lead us.

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This morning's readings place a stark contrast between the darkness of our age and the power of Christ to cut right through that darkness. The prophet Isaiah speaks words of encouragement into a time of political disaster: God's city had been destroyed, God's house burned down, God's people had been carried off into exile. The prophet tells how God's people experience life as in a haze. In the same way, in which the smoke haze that covered our city this week, dulls all colours and constricts the summer sky, so the people to whom Isaiah delivers his message, experience their daily lives: dulled and constricted as if a great darkness had descended on them. Yet even that darkness, Isaiah tells them, would not last forever. The grace-filled light of God would shine again on them, and pierce their gloom. They would once again arise and stand; for God himself would lift them up, would rise upon them. At that time of fulfilment, the prophet tells, 'the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you'. The gloom of dust and darkness will be pierced and the light will once again be seen by God's people.

This vision is true not only for the descendants of the people who found themselves in the crisis that led to the destruction of their homes and sanctuaries; the people who literally were shrouded in the darkness of exile. Isaiah makes clear that God's vision is true for all people. When God's light shines forth, the prophet tells, all nations will make their way to that light. So gracious, so gentle, warm and comforting is that light, that 'nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn'. When God's light shines forth, the nations will 'gather together'. People long separated will come together again: 'your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms'. Then the gifts of God's good creation will be shared by God's people, as the 'abundance of the sea will be brought to you, and the wealth of the nations shall come to you'. When God's gracious light is seen in the darkness, God's people may breathe lightly again, may stand up again, as they 'lift up their eyes and look', and see all people gathered together.

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In our gospel reading from Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus, the light of God that shines forth in the dark, took the form of a star. A star rising in the East, so bright, that it alerted a group of scientists. Wise, learned, men who were so captured by the star's unusual brightness and gracious light, that they left their observatories and their day-to-day obligations to follow the star, as it made its way across the horizon. The star, we have sung in our carols, led them first to the court of the ruling king, Herod, who was astounded at the news that the light of God should have come among his people in the form of a child. 'Where is the child heralded by this star', the wise men asked the king, 'for we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage?' The king's own scientists were consulted, who consulted prophecies of old, and told the king that the ruler to shepherd God's people would come from David's city, Bethlehem. As they make their way to Bethlehem, the king commands the wise men to bring him word of the child and its location. The wise men leave Herod's court and, guided by God's light, are led to the place where God's own child was born. They arrived at the manger, and pay homage. As they reached their destination, they were overjoyed, and worshipped the boy. And gave him their treasure, offering royal gifts. Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country to share the news of how God's light had pierced the darkness of this world. As they tell of how they found God's Son in a manger, they bring to life Isaiah's vision: the nations coming to God's light, 'shall bring gold, frankincense and myrrh, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord'.

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From the beginning of the coming among us of God's light in the child of Bethlehem, people from all walks of life, from all kinds of background have been assembled together by the grace-filled light of the Incarnation. In our second reading, from the

epistle to the Ephesians, our Patron St Paul explains how he, too, came to share in the grace of God's light. How, himself stopped in his tracks, and blinded by God's light, came to understand that God sought to come close to all people. The nations, the gentiles, have become children of God; heirs, inheritors of God's promise, Paul tells. In the coming among us of the light of Christ at Christmas, the eternal purposes of God have been fulfilled, so that all people may have 'access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in Christ'. In the coming among us of the gracious light that shines on all nations, everybody is given the right to become 'sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus'; if only they call on him and believe this good news. All people can come close to God, Paul tells, because in Christ, God has come close to us. The creator of the universe has become a vulnerable child to show us, vulnerable as we are, the capacity to become children of our heavenly Father. The creator of all gave up all, his boundless riches, so that he might share our life, our suffering, our deaths, so that we can have hope in times of great darkness.

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I remember well the great bushfires of 2009. Katherine and I had just visited her family in Victoria and had returned to England. A week or so after our return, this state erupted in flames. Hectares and hectares of land were destroyed, homes and lives lost. From afar, with the recent experience of having visited some of the places now lost, we watched on, only able to pray, phone and hope. A decade later, our state is in flames again, fires burning on an incredible scale. Thousands of people are made homeless, a naval evacuation – unprecedented in peace time – was undertaken on Friday to bring to safety the people trapped in Mallacoota. Among them are friends, fellow ministers, staff of our diocese. Again, we turn to prayer, asking that God's grace-filled light might pierce the darkness of our age. And not only the darkness of the age, but the darkness of our hearts: that God's light might shine in us, so that by our grace-filled action we may become people who bear Christ's light to others.

There are many ways in which we can carry Christ's light to those in darkness, today's readings assure us:

- In our gospel reading, the scientists who followed the Christ-light in their hearts to the manger went home rejoicing, using their gifts of diligence and wisdom in service of others. We too can use our gifts of scientific inquiry and learning, our knowledge about the changing patterns of weather and climate in persuasion and persistence, as we work actively to reduce the effects of climate change on our world through our actions. These can be very concrete actions: many of us already implement sustainability measures. In this Cathedral we have cut our carbon footprint by 30%, and are actively pursuing measures to increase this target further. By our engagement as citizens we

can take this beyond the doors of our homes and Cathedral, and persuade and lobby our political representatives to implement further sustainability measures throughout our state and nation. Use your gifts and wisdom diligently to shine Christ's light into this crisis.

- In our first reading, the people of Isaiah's day were told to lift their heads high, to stand in the midst of darkness and keep looking for light. We too can help others stand tall when they find themselves in darkness. Again, this can be very practical: we can donate time or funds to support the emergency effort in our state. We can open our homes to family and friends, or strangers, who have been made homeless in regional Victoria, or who may need a break from the relentlessness of fighting fires. We can listen and comfort those who have been traumatised and deeply affected by the current crisis in our nation. By our prayer for emergency workers, fire fighters, people affected by the fires we can uphold them before God, and ask that he would shine his light of grace into these dark days. Use your gifts of encouragement and compassion to shine Christ's light into this crisis.
- And finally, in our epistle, our patron Saint took on the ministry of making known this good news to all people. We too can, like him, share the good news that God has come close to us in Christ Jesus, so that he may share our burdens, help us carry the cross we share with him. We too can share the 'promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' by becoming its servant: that all people have become fellow-heirs of Christ, because Christ gave his life so that all might share life forever with God. By our testimony, and our acts of kindness, by our proclamation and our confidence in God's promises, we can be servants of the gospel to the people of our state. Use your gifts of grace and kindness to shine Christ's light into this crisis.

As we face the darkness of the bushfire crisis, I pray (with our patron St Paul) that God would strengthen us with power through his Holy Spirit to inspire our heartfelt prayer. That Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith to inspire our persistent action. That we would be filled with the measure of all the fulness of God, to inspire our open-hearted generosity. That we would grasp how wide, and long and deep Christ's love for us is, to inspire our gracious witness. That we would be rooted and established in God's love, to enable us to light up our state by our acts of kindness and compassion.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.