

The Fourth Sunday of Lent, 3rd April 2011 – ‘Children of Light’

Readings: Ephesians 5: 8-14, John 9: 1-41

“For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light”.

Lent touches every part of our lives as a gathered worshipping community, or at least it's meant to, and that's very clearly manifested I guess in our readings during this time. I said they would be long, and they are, and we can consider that part of our Lenten discipline if you like. But while we're presented with several lengthy and action-packed readings, with lots of fodder for a sermon or ten, I'm actually going to focus mainly on the shortest of them this morning, and I'm going to do that for a couple of reasons.

First of all, I want to return briefly to the theme of my sermon last time I preached, which was a fortnight ago, and in doing that I want to say thank you to those who sought me out and spoke with me about what I said. For some that sermon obviously touched a nerve, and in some cases a fairly raw one, and I really do appreciate people coming to me to talk about that.

I talked about my approach to preaching when I first arrived in Havelock North, but I guess it has been eight years so maybe I should touch on it again, and the most important thing to know is that I don't expect you to agree with everything I say. In fact, if you did I would be worried. Sometimes I'm not even sure I agree with what I say, but the real point is that what I hope to achieve when I preach is to get you thinking. And if people go home and discuss what I've said that's great, and I don't mind if you go home and say 'I think that was a load of rubbish' – although I'd prefer you didn't go around everyone afterwards saying that, at least not unless you're prepared to come and say it to me too.

Preaching, for me, is a gift and a privilege, and I take it very seriously. I was trained in a tradition that believed preaching was important, and within our on Anglican tradition that seriousness is demonstrated by the fact that only those licensed by the bishop to do so can get up and preach regularly. For me what I do here in the pulpit is part of what I do there at the altar. There I break open the bread and share the Body of Christ, here I break open the Word and share the experience of God that I find within it. These are my words and my thoughts, but I promise you I go to great lengths to try to ensure they are what God wants me to say, and one thing I have discovered over the years is that sometimes what God wants me to say won't be easy, for me or for others.

Two weeks ago I talked about the most famous scripture verse in the world, John 3: 16, and I suggested that maybe the overriding message of that verse is that love wins. I have now read Rob Bell's new book by the way, and I can tell you it isn't a universalist manifesto, it is in fact a good old fashioned Bible study in which he suggests maybe the place to start to find out about heaven and hell and all that stuff is in what Jesus actually said. It's radical stuff.

Anyway, what some of you heard me say last time was that it doesn't matter what religion you follow or if you follow no religion at all, you'll still go to heaven. I don't think I actually said that, but some people heard that, and what I want to talk about today is partly in response to that.

Ephesians chapter five. Firstly, a quick comment on why I'm not preaching on the Gospel today, in case you're feeling ripped off having sat or stood through what might have felt like an hour of gospel reading. I am actually going to refer to John this morning, but the problem with trying to unpack that story is that Jesus has already done it. When we approach the encounter with the man blind from birth in John 9, and the healing of that man, despite the fact that he never asked to be healed, it's important that we recognise that when Jesus starts talking again in verse 41, the last verse we heard today, he doesn't stop there. What this encounter actually means is covered in the next chapter, which we will eventually get to but not until a few Sundays after Easter.

This is a common structural pattern in John's gospel; first there is the miracle, or the sign as John prefers to call them, then a dialogue about that miracle, such as all the conversations in today's reading, and then finally Jesus provides a commentary on the miracle that builds a theological framework for interpreting it. All relatively straightforward, it just takes a couple of chapters usually to get through.

So the problem with preaching on this gospel reading today is that without also covering yet another 21 verses on top of the 41 you've already heard we are running pretty much blind, pun very much intended.

So, Ephesians. We don't know a lot about the background to this Epistle, although we do not that it almost certainly isn't written by Paul. Most scholars believe it was originally a sermon written for a baptism, and while we're not a hundred percent sure that Ephesus was the intended audience, if it was that's all the better because as a city Ephesus bears certain similarities to the context within which we live today in as much as it was a large, metropolitan area with a diverse population, and the early Christians were just one among many different religious groups.

Above all else what Ephesians sets out to do is answer the question posed by the disciples in Luke's gospel, "How then shall we live?" The answer, according to Ephesians, is "as children of light."

Here, by the way, is why this epistle reading pops up in the middle of a whole bunch of reading from Romans in the lectionary; because light and dark are, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, central themes in John's gospel. So the healing of a blind man in John is not so much about the healing or the blind man, but about light replacing darkness.

One of the reasons why Ephesians was originally attributed to Paul is because it clearly contains some elements of Pauline theology. Paul's idea of the fruits of the Spirit, for example, are clearly visible when we read, "for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." But far from being a kind of academic, theological exercise, more than anything Ephesians tries to address the real, present, lives of the people to whom it is addressed. "live in the light now" it says, "wake up! Come alive!" This isn't about a group of people being told to prepare for after they die, this is a call to live the life that Christ promised in the here and now, not the hereafter.

That's really what I was trying to get across two weeks ago, albeit in a somewhat clumsy way. Christianity, this faith we claim and call our own, is not actually about what happens when we die. The whole idea behind Love Wins is that God's love and the eternal life it promises starts now. And what the scriptures go on to tell us, and Ephesians is a prime example, is that the task of the Christian is to live that life.

"Live as children of light."

Ephesians being the odd one out today and only giving us a few verses, we miss out on some of the concrete examples of what it means to live as children of light that come next. These include things like 'understanding the will of the Lord', that is spending time listening to what God wants, 'being filled with the Spirit' rather than wine, "singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts," and "giving thanks to God at all times." And above all, and we do get this bit, to live as children of light means being awake; awake to what God wants, awake to what's happening around us, awake to those things that bring darkness instead of light. There are actions involved in all these things, but this isn't just about what we do, it's about how we live, our way of life and Ephesians is clear this is a life lived with others.

This is the essence of the verses following the ones we've heard this morning. Living as children of light means being awake and active and visible in the world around us, and it's something we do in community, all of us adopted as children of God and therefore family to one another. And so part of living as children of light is living together, caring for the whanau, looking after one another, loving each other, even when we find it hard to like each other. And sometimes that will be hard, and yet when we think of our own families I hope that we think of them as a blessing, overall. So too this family, this extended body of Christ within which we live as children of light, this too is meant to be a blessing. This life is not something to be endured, a demand to be put up with while we wait for something better to come, this is no warm up act for the feature presentation to come, this is the main event, a gift from God, a calling to live as those already raised from death into new life with all that such a gift entails.

So may we live that life. May we live as those who are awake. May we live as those for whom eternal life has already begun. And may we live as children of light and love. Amen.