

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

Sunday 29th May 2016

Ephesians 5:7-14; Matthew 5:13

Rev John Barr



Some years ago and shortly before I finished up in my previous position with the Uniting Church National Assembly, I was standing in the lift when one of the national leaders of the church walked in.

We exchanged greetings before he went on to say: *“Oh I hear you are leaving UnitingWorld after so many years. Where are you going?”* My reply appeared to stun him a little as I said *“I have been called to serve in West Epping”*. *“West Epping”* the church leader said (who shall remain nameless), *“that’s a good placement.....how did you manage that?”*

I am not sure if I was reading this church leader correctly or not, but his response appeared to suggest I had either talked myself into a good placement or I was the recipient of some good luck. For West Epping had, and I suggest, still has, the reputation among many church leaders as being a pretty high-powered, go-getting, successful congregation.

And when you think about it, West Epping does have runs on the board. There’s About Face, OneHeart and there’s Lent Event. All these initiatives, and indeed many others including March into Mission, Men’s Shed, Amazing Women, Mainly Music, the annual lamington drive and Advent Workshop, have had an impact on the wider church. They clearly have left their mark.

But is West Epping a high-powered, go-getting, successful congregation? Are we a shining example of what God is doing in the world today? Is our commitment to innovation, our openness to change, our depth of commitment to the Gospel and our compassion towards others a fitting benchmark for the rest of the church to follow?

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Now, I don't wish be negative here. For this is a marvelous, gifted congregation whose contribution to the community around us and to the wider church is very commendable. Indeed, the faithful contribution of so many people is deeply appreciated. It's a fitting example of what the church is about.

But we cannot afford to rest on our laurels and think everything is just fine.

For you see, the more we rest on the successes of the past and the more we pat ourselves on the back for what has been achieved here - the more we risk being left behind by the rest of the world that passes us by at a rapid rate.

Indeed, in this new, rapidly changing world, there are people who don't even know who or what the church is. There are people who only ever hear the name of the Lord when it is taken in vain. There are people whose only awareness of the church happens when child abuse is reported or when people who wear clerical collars are identified as paedophiles.

In this new and rapidly changing world, there are people who only ever see or experience the church in terms of a body whose inertia and struggle to survive suggests its unable to come to terms with what modern science is telling us or with what the contemporary prophets of our day are saying.

And here we risk moving from being a dynamic, outward looking community who is there for others to becoming a community that is static, inward looking, self-satisfied and self-absorbed.

A few weeks ago, Wendy Harmer, in her morning program on radio station 702 suggested living on Sydney's northern beaches, otherwise known as the "insular peninsula", was a bit like living in a Tupperware container. Some of us "oldies" will know all about Tupperware - its durable and convenient as a means of creating a sealed, air tight environment.

Here one is contained, one is secure, indeed, one is conveniently cut off from the rest of the world. But such an experience creates an environment that can be, static, stale and quiet stifling!

My sincere apologies to anyone with northern beaches connections – it's a nice place to live and my daughter has lived there quiet happily for a number of years. Indeed, my wife and I are regular visitors to Dee Why and its marvellous seaside cafes.

But I think you can get Wendy Harmer's drift.....

For we all risk living in Tupperware containers. We all feel comfortable living and breathing in places that are familiar. We all share a preference for places that are secure, that offer protection and distance us from the things that challenge and stretch us.

But is this really the way Jesus calls us to live?

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The Bible is full of references to light and one way of reading this is to suggest light somehow protects us from the darkness, that light is a foil to the perilous, menacing void out there that regularly threatens to consume us.

Here light causes the darkness to retreat. Here, light expels, it banishes the confounding hazards that haunt us. Light does this by creating a kind of protective field that wards off danger and protects us from all that threatens - much like a security light or an external flood light that shepherds our backyards.

So, in this sense, to be people of the light - or as Paul says in Ephesians, “children of light” – one becomes the kind of community that is protected and secure. Here the church is invincible. Here we are impervious to what’s going on beyond limits of our community. Here we are isolated and immune from the things that threaten and menace us.

Friends, in this sense, light becomes our handmaiden. Light becomes our baton against the things that challenge. Light becomes our weapon against the things that jeopardize who we are and how we choose to live.

But I am not so sure this is the way Jesus intends us to understand light.

For you see, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents light, not as a security blanket or as means of preserving what’s important to us. Moreover, the way light is presented in the scriptures says it’s not actually designed to ward off danger or set up a security zone.

Rather, light is presented as a means of illuminating what’s out there. It’s offered as an avenue of showing us the way forward.

Think about it. *“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”*



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Friends, light illuminates what's out there. Light enables us to see, not necessarily what we want to see and not what we particularly feel comfortable with. Rather, light exposes what's there, light reveals the things that are present, light unveils, light discloses the very truth of what is going on.

Secondly, light shows us the way. Here to be "children of light" means we are not static. We are not fixed to one place or to one way of doing things. Rather we are on a journey. For light is all about engaging, light is all about being proactive and being on the move. And here light implores us to step out of our cherished comfort zones to negotiate the radically new terrain that is shaping the world in which we live.

And thirdly, light shows us up. Light says we are present. Indeed, light puts us on display. It makes us a target. Here we can't hide, we can't pretend. We are literally out there and are noticed. And that makes us vulnerable. For, when the light shines, we are anything but secure!

Think about the world we live in today. It's rapidly changing. Our neighbourhood is moving from a middle class Anglo, predominantly Christian, demographic to an aspirational multicultural, predominantly multi-faith one.

Here to be "children of light" means we need to open our eyes to the changing situation around us. And here we must allow the light to assist us perceive and to help us understand what to do in terms of mission and outreach in this radically different context.

Think about the world we live in today. The community around us is rapidly moving from a stable suburban neighbourhood to a fluid urban high-rise one. So, we, too, need to change. We need to move beyond our traditional way of being church to embrace a new way that connects with a very different demographic. And here the light can guide us. Here the light can take us forward and show us the way.



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Think about the world we live in today. Christendom is over. People who reside in this locality express many different faiths. Many express no faith at all. There are those who have never heard of the church or simply think the church is a relic from the past that is constantly lampooned or subject to ridicule.

Here the light challenges us to declare who we are and what we stand for. Here we are challenged to make a stance and to claim a place in the public domain that is proactive and upfront in terms of declaring the Good News of Jesus Christ and truths of God's Kingdom. It's risky and it can be nerve-racking. But it's what God requires.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what has happened in the past is a cause for great joy and celebration. We must never forget this. But the future now beckons us on. And, believe me, it's a whole new ball game!

This isn't an easy task. Yet, you know, we as a congregation here in West Epping have already exercised a significant commitment with our call to Radhika, our new and most capable minister. Meanwhile, our Church Council is made up of gifted, talented people who are already giving their time and their skills in a most generous way.

And there is each one of you with your talents in music, craft, leisure ministry, cooking, group leadership, administration, finance, maintenance, technology and media. Indeed, there is each one of you who are gifted in understanding the Bible, leading worship, prayer ministry, working with children, hospitality, pastoral care, community service and simply being a friend.

With these marvellous things in mind, no-one wants to live in a Tupperware container unless, of course, you wish to procrastinate, stall and eventually suffocate and die.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us be "people of the light". And as we commit ourselves to this calling do consider these three things:



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Firstly, pause and look around you. Seek to understand what's going on. Ask what's really happening. Sense out and name the truth of the situation we are facing.

Secondly, be prepared to look forward, to move on and to embrace the future. Here, as "lights of the world", we are challenged to be open to new voices. We are called to take on new initiatives. We are invited to travel along new paths - paths that seek new objectives, that embrace new visions and dream new dreams.

And thirdly, be prepared to show ourselves and name who we are. Moreover, be willing to establish our place in the world, as we declare openly and confidently the liberating, life-giving Good News of Jesus – that is the hope for all humankind.

Friends, the church is at a cross-roads. West Epping is at a cross-roads. We are, I believe, moving towards a tipping point.

But, you see, there is no need to panic, there is no need to give up. For, we do have a future. We do have the means, we do have the gifts, we do have the talents and we actually do have the resources to make the changes and to move on.

For, you see, if we didn't have these things, then God wouldn't be calling us to be the church in this place. Moreover, if this was not so, I assure you I wouldn't have accepted the call to be your minister!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the light has come. The light has come to us. And it comes to show us the truth. It comes to show us the way. It comes to build us up and empower us to be heralds of God's love, mercy and hope.

Let us, therefore, be "children of light". Let us walk confidently and assuredly in that light.

For, remember, God has called us into being to be God's church in this place, now and in the future!

Amen.



Questions for reflection:

- What truths do you need to identify and name?
- What are the biggest challenges facing this congregation?
- Where do you think God is leading us?
- What does it mean for us to be a light on the hill – in terms of openly proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ?



- Please see next page for information about Discipleship Month (30th July – 1st September)



Beginning on Saturday 30th July and concluding Thursday 1st September, we will spend time studying, reflecting, discussing and praying about our calling as God's people as we bear witness to Jesus Christ and engage in God's mission. This is **DISCIPLESHIP MONTH**.

Focussing on the "**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations**" a sermon series will take place over five Sundays, commencing on Sunday 31st July. Study material will be made available for groups to meet during this period. You are encouraged to join one of these groups who will meet over a period of five weeks either on Sunday after church, one night during the week or on Friday afternoon 1pm-3pm.

On Saturday 30th July there will a **WEST EPPING TOGETHER DAY**. This is an opportunity for us to gather, to enjoy one another's company, to have fun and to launch Discipleship Month. (West Epping Uniting Church 9.30am – 3.30pm.)

The "**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations**" provide useful tools to assist us understand our calling as we reach out to the community with the Good News of Jesus.

SERMON SERIES:

Sunday 31st July – "**Radical Hospitality**" – here we are challenged to engage in an active desire to invite, welcome, receive and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover Christ.

Sunday 7th August – "**Passionate Worship**" – here we are encouraged to reflect worship as a place where God transforms lives, heals wounds, renews hope, shapes decisions, inspires change and reaches out in compassion. Worship involves our utmost and our highest efforts. It's the most important hour of the week.

Sunday 14th August – "**Intentional Faith Development**" – here we are called to develop in our faith and provide opportunities for people in the wider community grow in the grace and love of God.

Sunday 21st August – "**Risk-Taking Mission**" – here we are exhorted to make a positive difference to the lives of people and the world around us. Such a priority involves moving beyond our "comfort zones" and taking risks for the sake of the Gospel.

Sunday 28th August – "**Extravagant Generosity**" – here we are commissioned to give in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ. It is a giving that comes out of our love for God and neighbour.

Discipleship Month will conclude on Thursday evening 1st September with a **SMALL GROUPS CONNECT NIGHT**. Here study groups will report back on their learnings and we will identify those things God is teaching us as we move forward as a congregation (West Epping Uniting Church 7.30 – 9.30pm).
