

Sermon Lent IV Year B 2024

In the story of humankind, so often joy, wonder, and awe has been inspired simply by *looking up*. What the ancients felt when they looked up on a clear, still night to the stars can be ours too. Now, this is not really possible in our cities, but certainly is in the country and out bush. The night sky can still stir us to wonder, joy, awe. It is not accidental that the great churches of the world have soaring ceilings. Windows and arches that lead the eye *upward*. And not only upward. In most traditional church designs, there is also a strong *horizontal*, pulling the eye *forward*. In churches built along traditional designs - even very simple, small churches - the eye is drawn forward to a central focus. We see this play out even here. From the very back of the church, we can perceive the irresistible direction of our focus: this altar. In some styles of church architecture, the ceilings are decorated so to evoke heaven itself, with angels, and the host of heaven, with clouds, and beams of light. It is a tradition continued in this place as well, with the stars painted above the sanctuary. Not mere decoration. Not just an artistic flourish. They seek to draw the mind, heart, and soul *upward and outward*.

At every mass – with the bread and wine placed upon the altar, before we commence the Prayer of Thanksgiving in which the elements will be transformed into the very Body and Blood of Christ - the priest exhorts: *Lift up your hearts!* Our faith urges us to look upward and outward not only physically, but interiorly as well. This looking upward and outward reflects an essentially spiritual insight: we will not find life, happiness and truth by looking inward, but by looking up and out. Up and out *not* to the stars, or vague contemplations. But up and out *to what God reveals of himself*. And even if this is not always in the way we want, or in the way we think God ought to have shown himself, or we think it would be so much better if God showed himself in a certain definitive way here and now to me, God in God's wisdom has elected to reveal himself in a way *that is enough*. The witness of the saints points to the truth of this. Their lives testify that nothing needs to be added to what God shows us. We simply need the eyes to see this. And the humility to accept it.

The *alternative* of looking toward the truth and life God proposes for us is captured in the first reading placed before us today from the Second book of Chronicles. This is a story of what happens when we *do not* look up and out toward God, but instead in the other direction. Looking elsewhere amounts to nothing less than a rebellion with earth-shattering consequences.

It is the story of God's people who presume there are better alternatives than what God had shown. But such a choice has consequence. And in this instance the destruction of the Temple and of their homeland, and 70 years exile in Babylon. Importantly, the story is not told as an example of the vindictive punishment of God. Rather, when we ignore the good-order God intends for us, we end up harming ourselves. Like a loving parent who tells the child not to put their hand in the fire. If the child ignores the command and the child gets burnt, it is not the parent who causes the harm, but willful disobedience. In short, *what God proposes for us, is for our good.*

In the biblical imagination, turning away from God, and setting our sights on something else is often phrased in the terms of *forgetfulness*. Now, for the exiles in Babylon, we might imagine that many of them prospered. And that this prosperity was accompanied by a temptation to forget one's homeland and one's distinct identity, and to just 'blend in'. Babylon was attractive, even exciting. It was the centre of culture and sophistication, the greatest empire the world had yet seen. The exiles faced a temptation to get comfortable in Babylon, to imagine that this was their home and their future. But to do so was to risk losing the one thing that really mattered: their identity as God's chosen people. The Psalm chant we heard before the gospel speaks to this very context, of the exiles in Babylon: "*May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember you not, if I prize not Jerusalem above all my joys!*"

The temptation of Babylon is the temptation for every Christian of every age. We too can forget our true home. Every Christian has to negotiate the tension between how much, and to what extent we cosy up to the prevailing mood and ideas of our culture. And like the exiles we need reminders of what we should be looking toward. And we can be a reminder to others as well! It's part of the reason I wear the distinct clerical gear most of the time. It's why churches and places of worship - beautiful and prominent - are so important in our tradition. It's why every Christian household should have a cross in a prominent position in the home. Why grace before meals when the whole family gathers is important. To remind ourselves and those around us, of the reality of God. Are they essential? No. Are they helpful? Absolutely yes!

We don't have to go very far to hear people making excuses or trying to apologise for these things: clerical clothes are a barrier to 'real ministry'; our churches are expensive to maintain and money is better spent elsewhere; we don't want to offend the

neighbours, or embarrass the children... Now, these reminders are not ends in themselves, but *always* point to something else, a greater truth, a deeper reality. To abandon them would also mean we slip into a very private, inward-looking club, not really interested that other people might be searching for a reminder, but don't know where to look. To be reminded of God need not be complicated. But we can, in very simple and modest ways, help people *remember* God. The ultimate pointer to the truth of God will be the quality of our lives, shaped and directed by our love of God.

That life and truth comes from looking outward and past ourselves is also indicated for us in the gospel today. In the gospel, we hear Jesus continuing a conversation with Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night, but was gradually being led from darkness toward the light. In other words, the encounter with Jesus leads us from the wrong direction to the right direction. In the encounter with Nicodemus our Lord points to the curious story from the Book of Numbers, and of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Again, this comes from an account of the people of Israel complaining, and thinking (again!) that they know better than God. The consequence in this instance only remedied by the people *looking upon* the serpent Moses lifted up. We might be tempted to dismiss the story from Numbers as some sort of fairy tale. But this is truth at its deepest level! We can only be healed when we look out and up! In the gospel, Jesus indicates that he too will be lifted up, and that this too will be the source of life. The saving action in both comes by *looking*. Now, most of us would much rather live in the illusion that we have the solutions to our own lives, and can set our own direction. But in the terms of the Gospel today, so often we '*prefer darkness to the light.*' We forget God, and pretend we can have some existence apart from him.

In a few moments, we will move to font to baptise little Madeline. As part of our baptismal rite she will be presented with a lighted candle. You can never predict what small children will do, but almost always at this point in the service the child will transfix their eyes on the small flickering light. I will say to her, '*Receive the light of Christ, that when the bridegroom cometh thou mayest go forth to meet him, and see that thou keepest the grace of thy baptism.*' The light that we are invited to gaze upon and to follow is not within. And it is not just any light that will guide the way. Christian life is assent to follow the One True Light. And in the mystery of Easter we celebrate in a few weeks' time, we know it to be the Light that is trustworthy and true. Amen.