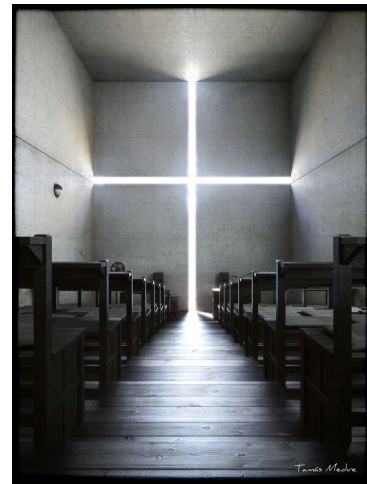


**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH  
HIROSHIMA REMEMBRANCE DAY  
SUNDAY 9 AUGUST 2015  
Rev. Anneke Oppewal  
Exodus 40: 35-38, Psalm 116, John 8:12; 9, Revelation  
21: 22-26**



**“Light from Light”**

Do you know that feeling of the neon lights being turned on at the end of a party? Mercilessly showing up every puddle and stain on the floor, and every crack in the wall? Finding yourself shocked back to earth bleary-eyed and not entirely sure where you are by someone who wants to get on with cleaning the premises and getting it ready for the next morning?

And what about the experience of massive fireworks suddenly lighting up the night sky, filling you with excited awe and longing for more?

I think that when the writer of John has Jesus identify himself as “the light of the world” in the passages we’ve read from the gospel today, he is trying to provide his audience with both those experiences at the same time.

The experience of light uncovering, mercilessly, the cracks, puddles and stains of the world we are in, and the experience of awe-inspired wonder when we find God’s glorious presence lighting up our existence.

I like to warn you in advance: When the gospel talks about Jesus being the light of the world in this instance, it is not talking about a little candle in a corner somewhere, or a little light in our hearts. It is about a light brighter than the sun turning on and lighting up the city, and even the world with its brilliance. It’s talking about that light that, according to Revelations 21, makes all other light dull in comparison.

Let me talk you through the background:

This part of the gospel of John is pictured against the backdrop of the festival of Sukkoth, otherwise known as the festival of booths, or shelter, or the festival of tabernacles. Four names, all the same thing. This festival was, and still is, the longest, most important and most joyous festival of the Jewish liturgical calendar. (See Exodus 23: 16b, 34: 22-23; Leviticus 23: 33-43; Numbers 29: 12-39; Deuteronomy 16: 13-15). It starts 5 days after the feast of Atonement and lasts for 7 full days of joyous celebration.

It commemorates God’s presence with his people in the wilderness. It remembers God guiding his people in cloud and fire to the promised land, his presence in the tabernacle, his provision of food and water, his care and protection on that 40 year long, dangerous journey through the wilderness. King Solomon chose this festival to consecrate the temple he built, adding to the festival’s importance and reinforcing the connection of the temple to the tabernacle and God’s presence with his people over the ages. After the return from Exile, the second temple was also dedicated at this festival. And Judas Maccabeus rededicated the temple after the desecration by Antiochus Ephiphanes also at this festival.

The festival became more and more deeply tied to the experience of the presence of God with his people on their journey through the centuries over time.

The festival also kept alive the memory of the booths and shelters that the people of Israel lived in when they received the covenant and the 10 commandments at Mount Sinai. For the whole seven days of the festival, the people of Israel, to the present day, live outside in shelters made up of palm leaves, vines and

other greenery, fruit and vegetables. (This year the festival will start on September 22 and there will be all sorts of celebratory activities in and around Melbourne).

The festival not only looks back; it also looks forward and is connected to the mission of Israel among the nations and the coming of the Messiah (Zecharia 14: 16-17).

In Jesus' day, the temple, sacrifice at the high altar, water drawn from the pool of Shiloam and four giant golden menorahs played an important role in the rituals surrounding the festival.

Water kept the memory alive of the water miracles in the desert, the parting of the sea, the crossing of the river Jordan, and, more importantly, the water gushing from the rock at Meriba (Exodus 17, Numbers 20) that, according to legend, followed them around the desert and provided the people of Israel with water for 40 years (see 1 Corinthians 1-5).

Every morning of the festival, priests would, after the morning sacrifice of a lamb, process to the main altar in the temple precinct from two directions. From the pool of Shiloam with a pitcher of water they'd drawn from there, and from the opposite direction with a pitcher of wine. They would beat the altar with willow branches to the sound of singing and trumpets playing in remembrance of the miracle at Meriba, and then the water and the wine would be poured over the altar, filling the bowl where the lamb was with a mixture of water and wine (you may want to remember water and blood coming from Jesus' side after he died on the cross, from Jesus as the lamb).

The altar had a deep, mythical significance in the minds of the believers. It was considered to be the keystone holding back the subterranean waters of chaos; a kind of lid or stopper keeping the chaos of death in check underneath. People believed that at the end of time from this place, a new creation would take shape. They believed that when the Messiah would come, the new creation would start here, flowing into the world and making everything new.

At night, the lighting of the menorahs reminded people of the glory cloud that led Israel through the wilderness by day, and the pillar of fire that lit up their camp by night. The cloud of fire that had rested on the top of Mount Sinai at the time the law was given, and descended upon the tabernacle afterwards, filling the Holy of Holies of the temple after it was built, as a sign of God's enduring, physical presence with his people. The light of one golden menorah burnt continuously in the temple all through the year, but at the festival of tabernacles, four massive, 50 feet high (that is, 15.24 metres on metric) menorahs would be lit in the court of women, with fires that burnt, according to Jewish records, as bright as the morning sun and lit up every nook and cranny of Jerusalem. There was a fire ceremony and torch dances where young men would throw torches in the air and catch them again.

The festival was an intense seven day, joyful spectacle, full of ritual and charged with deeper meaning and collective memories. It celebrated the presence and providence of God, the giving of the law, and the future gathering of the nations to the light of God's presence in Jerusalem. Expectations about the coming of the Messiah would run higher than at any other time of the liturgical year.

It is in this context that the writer of John has Jesus drop a bombshell: "I am the light of the world".

You may remember from last week how the "I am" alone is filled with reference to God's presence with his people. And where last week John has Jesus speak about bread, referring to God's providing in the wilderness, he now takes things a step further. He has Jesus no longer refer to something God gives, he has Jesus referring to and appropriating something God is. God's glory, God's presence, the Shekinah as the rabbis called it, is here, now, present, not only in Jesus, but as Jesus.

That the law abiding Jewish leaders don't like it is hardly surprising.

Where they stand becomes clear in two stories that bracket the words of Jesus. One, the story of the man born blind which we read today, and one the story of the woman caught in adultery. In both of these stories, the religious leaders are shown up as harsh and merciless when it comes to the interpretation and application of the law. This is not at all in accordance with the joyful celebrations of the festival and the teachings of their own tradition as they are presented at the feast. In the way they approach both the woman caught in adultery and the man born blind, there is no joy, no generosity, not a hint of the light and liberation that are such an important part of the celebrations. They use the law to trip up Jesus, they negatively apply the rules around the Sabbath to pass judgement on Jesus and use it as an excuse to get rid of one who brings light and life to people.

The Jewish leadership can't see, even where they are confronted with a light as bright as day. And they know it! In the story of the woman caught in adultery, they shrink back and disappear when they are invited to throw the first stone. In the story about the man born blind, the contradictions in their reasoning and their faulty judgement becomes more and more apparent, and they become more and more aggressive and nasty as a result of it.

As John tells the two stories, it is like the neon lights come on after the party. In a confrontation dripping with irony, the cracks in the reasoning and understanding of the religious leaders becomes painfully obvious. Both stories cast Jesus in the role as revealer and judge on behalf of God, contrasting the glory of God, God's true light, with the dim-witted understanding of those who are stuck in the unenlightened world of darkness. The religious leaders not only reject Jesus, but are shown to contradict their own traditions and rituals. They pit Moses and Jesus against each other, while it is clear for anyone to see that more than Moses is here. That in Jesus, the history and values they are celebrating at the festival are being recreated. With manna coming down from heaven, the waters parting underfoot. Jesus is the rock of salvation from where living waters flow, Jesus is the lamb that will be sacrificed with blood and water flowing from it. Jesus is the light that has come to guide the people of God through the wilderness, setting the world aflame, so the good and the bad are shown up like never before.

In the story of the man born blind, we see the same light that shows up the failure of the religious establishment to get what God, what this festival, what the Exodus, the law and the presence of God in tabernacle and temple is really about. For the man, it is like fireworks lighting up the night sky when his eyes open to the truth of who and what Jesus is. For him, it shows not only where the cracks and stains of sin are, but also where the bread of life that will sustain him in the desert and the living water from the Rock of Salvation may be found.

We see his faith grow in the confrontation as he engages with the others in the absence of Jesus. John, signalling, with even more irony, that Jesus doesn't even have to be there for his light to penetrate this man's darkness.

Thinking all this through this week, a sentence from one of the eyewitness accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima struck home for me. "When the bomb detonated, it was a light brighter than the sun, and then came the darkness".

Seventy years ago, a light brighter than the sun lit up the sky and left 140,000 people dead after a war that took millions of other lives across the globe. Man made light, forcing a man-made solution to a man-made mess. It may, or may not have, accelerated the end of the war; it may, or may not have, prevented many more deaths and dying. This week, reading from the gospel as we have done, contemplating the passage from Revelations as we have, hearing about Jesus as the light of the world, in the context of the festival of tabernacles, I think what we need to hear is that the true light of God is where it shines, shows up the cracks and stains of sin in this world, while at the same time bringing healing, insight and true understanding of who God is and what God wants to those who are open to it.

From this light, from this God, does not, does never, come destruction, suffering and pain. Judgement, yes, revelation, yes, showing up of where the shoe pinches, yes, but not, ever, even at its harshest, does this

light destroy and kill. On the contrary, if it comes to it, it chooses to be killed, to be destroyed, to be the lamb on the altar that keeps the forces of chaos at bay until such time where the new creation will start to flow into this world. It will rather suffer to show up the forces of death in that way than bite back.

What John tries to tell us through these stories and this announcement he has Jesus make, is that where Jesus enters the world the light comes on. A light as brilliant as the light that lit up all of Jerusalem at the festival. A light that celebrates God's presence, God's guidance, God's providing and care. A light that lights up the whole world and gathers the nations to it, as it was promised by the prophets.

Where Jesus enters, water and blood flow, and the sacrificial lamb becomes the centre of celebrations remembering God's goodness and mercy. Where Jesus enters, the altar stone holds back the chaos of death and destruction, pushing it away to make way for a new creation with God guiding the way once more in cloud and fire.

In all that richness of text and metaphor, we are invited to hear the call and respond to the light with the joy and commitment of those who have seen the light and want to live their life in it.  
Amen.