

The Coming of the Light

150th Anniversary

Sermon preached by The Rev'd Dr John Deane

at St James, King Street, Sydney

on Sunday 27th June, 2021

On this day when we mark and celebrate the festival of the 'Coming of the Light' into the Torres Strait let me begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging.

Edge-habitat is a remarkable and sometimes curious ecological phenomenon. It arises when the fringe areas of different eco-systems come into contact and increasingly overlap. The result is often a rich biological diversity which given time may evolve into new life forms or at the very least produce a greater resilience within existing forms.

Yet edge-habitat also exists with great vulnerability - its own character and strength take time to mature and it is often more prone to the immediate effects of the adverse conditions, particularly in relation to climate, which all eco-systems are required to deal with. Being on the edge or margins is a risky business, but as nature demonstrates time and time again, it also offers opportunity and the potential for newness.

The 274 small islands of the Torres Strait which now separate Australia from Papua New Guinea were once part of the massive land bridge which joined Australia to New Guinea and then on to Asia. It was one of the means by which the first peoples of this ancient land slowly migrated and settled here. At that time the Torres Strait region was probably not an expression of edge-habitat but rather an integral part of a broader tropical eco-system.

Over time the geography has changed dramatically and the eco-system of these remaining islands reflects their existence betwixt and between southern Papua on the one hand which generally lacks cyclones and northern Queensland on the other which does not have any lack of them.

But the creation of this waterway, which at certain times of the year is treacherous to navigate, not only brought with it a marine environment in which these islands were able to flourish but also for the people who made them their home, the chance to engage with peoples of other cultures who had also settled within the Pacific.

Although largely Melanesian the culture of the Torres Strait Islander people displays a rich diversity of influences. Moreover, their location meant they played a part in the movement of trade and perhaps more importantly, ideas throughout the whole Indian-Pacific region.

Early maritime exploration by European expeditions had generated awareness of the islands but the ruggedness of the waterway and the fearsome reputation of the inhabitants, who dwelt on only fourteen of the islands, as head-hunters, had limited the desire to investigate further. However, this began to change on the first of July 1871 when the Reverend Samuel Macfarlane from the London Missionary Society arrived on Erub, also now known as Darnley Island and began to evangelise the local inhabitants. These early missionary endeavours were not without great hardship and danger.

In time the missionaries were able to bring a level of much needed peace to the region. No mean feat: although the population of the region was only some few thousands, rivalry and warfare between the islands, each of which had its own language and customs, had been endemic for centuries. With the advent of peace, also gradually came improvements in health and education - benefits to this day which are readily acknowledged.

But this was the time of the great colonial missionary endeavours, wherein missionary societies and religious orders followed in the footsteps of the colonial powers, seeking to evangelise and civilise – their words not mine – the nations, cultures and societies under colonial rule.

Although some missionaries recognised the significance of local culture, most regarded the values and practices stemming from it to be inferior and in need of Christianisation. The latter being a reflection of a gospel and theologies very much inculturated into western understandings of politics, economics and society.

Now, just as the colonial powers divided the globe and recognised each other's sphere of influence, so too did the various mission societies seek to develop their own patch and not compete for the same souls.

Consequently, towards the end of the nineteenth century as more of the Pacific and New Guinea began to open up, the London Missionary Society felt called to leave the Torres Strait region for other mission fields. They approached the Anglican Church, in particular the Anglican Board of Mission, which already had mission stations in North Queensland, with a request to take on and continue the work in the Torres Strait.

The request seemed reasonable and thus ABM entered into the history of not only this engagement but also more importantly of the people themselves.

Over time this encounter has become acknowledged as the 'Coming of the Light' based initially on the understanding that the gospel in the form of the witness of these early missionaries brought light to cultures and communities which were until then set in darkness.

For those of you who are quick with numbers or have read the pew sheet it may already have dawned upon you that this year will be 150th anniversary of this event and that today we are anticipating the actual anniversary by four days.

Well, that is the past covered and why we come to celebrate this festival, but ABM has journeyed with the people of the Torres Strait for more than a century and it is no longer fitting to leave the paternalistic implication of the 'Coming of the Light' unchallenged. So let me highlight two elements, which I have already introduced into my narrative, edge-habitat with its risk and potential and Light and recognising the presence of the Holy Spirit let us step a little into the present and hopefully the future.

Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'

It has been my great privilege to visit the Torres Strait islands on several occasions during my time at ABM. On my second visit I was taken to a local art gallery where there was a display of work by local artists. My eye was immediately drawn to an impressive black and white or perhaps I should say dark and light print clearly based upon the 'Coming of the Light'.

Actually, it was one of a number of different prints in the gallery on the same subject. And I admit that the experience was a little unsettling - not because I am unfamiliar with the mix of religion and art, but because this experience was occurring in a commercial gallery designed for tourists.

In the centre of this particular print was the familiar Christian symbol of a cross, but this cross emanated light which was radiating out to encompass the whole scene. Surrounding the cross was humankind represented by individuals, arms raised, all clearly joined in common worship of God.

But the scene did not stop there because this worship was also calling forth and being joined by the people and church of the Torres Strait. They, in turn, were gathering up all of creation which was emerging from the sea, an ancient symbol of darkness and chaos.

I spoke to the owner of the gallery about the print and he was delighted to talk further. I remember much of the conversation but in particular his final words: "You know for a

long time we believed that the missionaries were actually the light and all that they said and did amounted to faith, but these day I think, as you see here, we understand it to be a bigger picture. Aren't we all called to be children of the light?"

Given the content of the gallery I guess that I should not have been surprised that the owner was also a theologian!

The Torres Strait, edge-habitat, where even Christianity has regarded its own presence until very recently as relatively marginal and a largely one-sided engagement! Yet here in the midst of vulnerability and fragility at various levels, faith in response to local culture, with its strong focus on corporate identity and responsibility, and a profound sense of connectedness to the rest of the created order has generated a bigger picture than many of us who regard ourselves as mainstream Christians are able to frame.

Initially, I admit that I was somewhat taken back by what I had found, but a version of the print now hangs in my office and has caused me to reflect on my own prejudices, the blinkers which keep me from coming to and seeing the light and the bigger picture, not only in the Torres Strait but in other contexts as well.

Yet, why was I surprised at all? Did not Jesus seek out the edge-habitat, the margins of his own context: the desert, the seashore, the poor and those with little social standing, the sick and the dying and there reveal God's presence and promise so that we might all become children of the light? Does not the Holy Spirit call to us to engage in a similar journey with the same transformative and mutually enriching purpose? And as St Paul reminds us, does not the whole of creation await our coming?

On this day let us continue to celebrate the Coming of the Light and its illumination with its potential newness which continues to offer to all of us.

Let me conclude by extending the acknowledgement with which I began this sermon. I acknowledge all the first peoples of the many lands which make up this nation. I pay my respects to their, elders: past, present and emerging and pray God's spirit will continue to guide us in the way of reconciliation and peace.