

OPENING OUR EYES AND HEARTS TO THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE

My youngest son was just nine when I became aware that all was not right with his eyesight. A visit to the optometrist confirmed my worst fears, Matt's eyesight was less than perfect and over a period of months, unknown to me, his vision had gradually deteriorated. Matt had both knowingly and unknowingly compensated for his short sightedness. He had moved himself nearer to the blackboard at school, friends read him the bits he could not see and he had avoided ball sports that gave him great difficulty, and by doing so had effectively hid his worsening vision from me.

Coming out from the optometrist with his new glasses he turned and looked towards the Western Hills and I will never forget the look on his face as he turned towards me and exclaimed, " Mum, I can see lots of different trees and bushes up there!" previously Matt had become accustomed to the distant landscape being just one green blur. His out of focus vision had become part of his life. He had learned to accept his less than perfect vision as being 'normal' and was amazed to find that clarity of vision could open up a whole new world for him.

Matt's story has many parallels to our own lives and those both known and unknown to us. How many times do we human beings adapt and compensate for a life that is less than ideal, so much so that it becomes the normal? All of us to a greater and lesser degree face times when our eyes and hearts are out of focus-be it through employment that is stressful or less than satisfying, deteriorating health, relationship difficulties or maybe financial stress.

In the past four weeks we have journeyed through Advent, often thought of as a period of waiting- waiting to once more celebrate the birth of Christ. A celebration that is now just minutes away. Yet far more important Advent is a time of preparation-preparing ourselves to open our eyes and hearts to seek a clearer vision, an understanding of what God's coming in human form truly means for us today.

All too often I think our vision of the magnitude of the birth of Christ becomes all too easily blurred in the frenetic build up to the event. There are presents to buy and maybe additional guests to cater for; if we are going away then trips need to be planned. Then there are the challenges for many of having insufficient money or absent family members who are dearly missed. All in all we yearly face the risk of being out of focus to what God's coming in human form is really all about.

Our reading from John cuts right to the chase. No manger scenes here, not even a mention of Mary and Joseph. Sweeping all that is recorded in the other Gospels regarding Christmas to one side he uncompromisingly makes his point.

The gospel of John was written after the separation from the synagogue to proclaim the Gospel message which gave the Christian community its identity and purpose. The Gospel features episodes in which individuals are caught between Jesus' call for faith and the Jewish authorities' rejection of his claims.

The purpose of the Gospel, therefore, was twofold: (1) to call believers to reaffirm their faith and move towards a more mature faith. And secondly to call "secret believers" those who were reluctant to come out into the open, to confess Jesus as Christ and join the Christian community. The twin commands of the Johannine community were to have faith and to love one

another. Those who believed already were understood to have eternal life here and now; they had already crossed from death to life.

For me John's opening words offers an outline of what Christ's earthly ministry was all about. He was the messenger, sent in human form to put the spotlight on, and again make clear God's light and love for us and through us to the world we live in.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

This, for John, is the revealing of the true Christmas story and it is set in the context of creation as a whole, "In the beginning." Creation is not a one off event of the past but is wrapped up in the here and now. It is the ongoing life and ministry of God with, and through, all of us. John repeats and carries on the Genesis story of creation, "In the beginning God said, 'Let there be...' and there was...." Land, sky, vegetation, living creatures of all kinds on land, air and sea, and humankind made in the image and likeness of God.

However as we hear and read fear, hesitation and doubt, for some, clouded the receiving of the message. Hardly surprising in many respects as a public declaration of being a follower of Christ could be very dangerous indeed. For others too moving away from the security of the known and walking along a path hitherto unknown was a hard ask.

Viktor Frankl wrote of his experiences as a prisoner held alongside so many other Jewish men in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau.

In one part of his book he reflects on the actions of some of his fellow inmates who had yearned so desperately for their freedom. They had been held captive so long that when they were eventually released, they walked out into the sunlight, blinked nervously and then silently turned around and walked back into the familiar darkness of the prison. They were simply unable to trust or grasp the message of freedom and hope that they were being told.

Father Anthony De Mello in one of his reflections picks up this theme.

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in a nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air. Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked. "That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth--we're chickens." So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was.

'Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness"'.
John 10.

Irenaeus in the second century proclaimed that, "*The glory of God is the human person fully alive.*"

What a wonderful goal for any Christian to reflect on and to aim towards this coming New Year, to be the very best we can be, fully alive and open to what we may be called to do.

As I begin to conclude I would like to share with you a few words of a meditation by Henri Nouwen titled “our unique call”

So many terrible things happen every day that we start wondering whether the few things we do ourselves make any sense. When people are starving only a few thousand miles away; when wars are raging close to our borders, when countless people in our own cities have no homes to live in, our own activities seem futile. Such considerations however can paralyse and depress us.

Here the word call becomes important. We are not called to save the world, solve all the problems and help all the people. But we each have a unique call to our families, our friends, in our work and in our world. We have to keep asking God to help us see clearly what our call is and to give us strength to live out that call with trust. Then we discover that our faithfulness to a small task is the most healing response to the illnesses of our time.

I can think of no simpler words to finish with than those of poet and writer Norman Brooks, who began his poem about Christmas by saying,

Christmas is forever, not for just one day,
for loving, sharing, giving, are not to put away
like bells and lights and tinsel, in some box upon a shelf.
The good you do for others is good you do yourself.
Amen.

Chris Frazer, December 24, 2017