

Good News for Everyone
Ephesians 3:1-12
January 5, 2020

Reading Isaiah 60's opening vision is like standing in front of a slow-moving parade. They are to lift up their eyes and look around at the amazing transformation about to enter their dark world: not only returning exiles (v. 4) but "the wealth of nations" (v. 5): camels, dromedaries, gold, frankincense, flocks, rams, offerings, silver, laborers to restore the city, vassal kings, and lumber, will adorn Jerusalem's streets. A new day is dawning after the darkness that has overwhelmed the city and its people after years of exile.

It's often difficult to look up and around when you are groping in the dark. One day on our tour in Jerusalem last April we stood in the Kidron valley looking up at the city walls high above us. We followed our guide into an ancient tunnel that would lead us up and inside the city. Soon it was apparent that this was not to be an easy climb: the ceiling was low and dripping water; the so-called lighting wasn't very helpful; and it was a rough floor. Between bumping our heads on the rough ceiling, tripping over the uneven floor, and trying to find the safest steps to take with the aid of our I-Phones; it was a hazardous journey. And it was dark! People were getting hysterical behind me as the line faltered ahead of us and claustrophobia was beginning to affect some of the group. If we are to see ahead, we are to lift our eyes and look. That is not easy when we have been engulfed in worry, depression and darkness of spirit. It takes time and discipline to focus our eyes in the brightness of a new sunny day. We have become accustomed to the dark. Isaiah wants us to look up and see that light has dawned.

Today we celebrate Epiphany which is connected to the visit of the wise men. Here too there is a light that guides them by way of a star. Matthew's birth story is set in Bethlehem where the holy family lives. He knows nothing of a census that brings the family from Nazareth. What he wants us to know is that this child is for everyone, yes, even those from non-Jewish ancient Persia. These star gazers are the first of the non-Jewish world to acknowledge Jesus as Lord. And it is

therefore appropriate that I ask us to venture out from this story to ask whether we too are open to welcoming others inside.

I remember a book I read during my university studies in England which has stuck with me. I was studying the rise of Puritanism in England and the growth of the movement in and around London. The author's thesis was that the large exodus from the farms, country villages and towns of early modern Britain into large cities like London precipitated a personal crisis for many of them. Cut off from their homes and village communities, these young men and women experienced loneliness and anxiety; they felt alienated and lost in cities like London. The author contends that during times of crisis people tended to seek out religion as a source of comfort and security. Puritanism, with its dynamic and confident Gospel, attracted these young folks. And the church welcomed them in.

I am often forced to ask myself the question why I chose to come inside? In other words, why did I choose to become a Christian?

My earliest memory of church in Canada was being invited to a young people's gathering at a local Baptist church near our home. What stands out in my memory is the sight of a table full of jellied deserts; I knew then I was in a different world. Also, what stands out was meeting other teens like myself who seemed so different from the friends I had hung with in Scotland. I think being disconnected from family, friends, culture, and land created in me a search for stability and security. As a teenager my emigration to Canada took me physically and emotionally thousands of miles from the people and places that had shaped my life, created a certain amount of disorientation, and perhaps even crisis is not too strong a word.

We often ask what relevance the church has for people today. For me during those difficult years of adjustment, the church was a place where I found a sense of home. Outside of this new community of church my human connections were restricted to the office where I worked. Nowhere else, work, casual friends, relationships, clubs, did I find a secure place to ask my deep life questions.

Paul in our Ephesians reading talks about a great mystery that has been hidden from view all throughout history. Who doesn't love a

mystery? But this is not your typical mystery story of who killed the guest: the butler, the host, the strange visitor, the gardener? No, there is no tragic event to be solved in this mystery.

Early in his letter Paul speaks of the Gentiles in Ephesus who have been adopted into God's family. He says in his opening greeting: *God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will. (Eph 1:5)* He means both Jews and Gentiles! In our reading he speaks of the Gentiles having been given the green light to enter God's family on the same ground as all Jews did, by faith in Jesus alone. Entry was no longer restricted to those of Jewish birth, or those who converted to Judaism. The surprise is that God has written a whole new group into his will. Paul writes: *the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph 3:6)* This is the mystery that has been hidden for centuries.

Let's be frank, it was not an easy pill to swallow for the Apostles. The Christian movement was essentially a Jewish sect in the early years. Paul's idea of taking the gospel to non-Jews was perfectly fine as long as they adopted Jewish purity laws, the laws regarding clean and unclean foods, obeyed the law and observed the Jewish practice of circumcision. Peter especially had heated confrontations with Paul over these issues. And it took a heavenly vision for Peter to change his mind. And even though it would continue to be an issue for the early church for decades the door to the non-Jew was beginning to swing open.

So here we are, a congregation of Gentiles, like thousands of others around the world, welcomed into the family of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the mystery revealed to Paul that outsiders are now insiders. As one translation puts it: *no more segregation-Christ has put the welcome mat out for everyone.*

Moreover, Paul teaches us here in Ephesians that it is through the church that this mystery of grace is modeled and proclaimed. It is through communities like ours, Paul proclaims, that the opposition powers are confronted by the truth in Jesus. It is a battle to win hearts and minds to the gospel of Jesus.

If the struggle for the early Christian movement was embracing Gentiles into the Christian fold, I wonder what our challenges are today? Apathy perhaps is one of the most difficult and widespread challenges for the church to face today. To reach this new generation with the light Isaiah and Matthew forecast surely we need to think seriously about our worship, our way of being and thinking. For many of us the challenge is to stop resisting change.

I'm reading my eighth Quintin Jardine novel, ***Lethal Intent***, and was struck by what one of the officials in the Scottish police said to the Acting Chief Constable: *We live in a changing world, even in Scotland...It's important that we keep up with events, so that our policing strategies are always relevant to the actual needs of the community.* I think this ought to echo our concerns!

Our churches reached their peak in the heady 50's. The worship patterns then were pretty formal and worked well for that generation. But this new generation have been shaped by very different forces and ideas. The church has been stubborn about the need to comply with the generational changes that have occurred over the past three decades. We live in a new social, religious milieu. The language, music, style, spirituality and informality that defines the new generation has challenged our churches.

Nor is purely a matter of style. It is also the content of the message and its relevance to today. As many contemporary writers tell us, folks who are seeking today are seeking not just ***what*** to believe, but also an ***emotional connection*** to the spiritual. The teaching and the music must address this relational reality. An intellectual grasp of faith is no longer on their wish list. They are the audience Diane Butler Bass talks about in her book, ***Christianity after Religion***. Rather, we meet a new generation of seekers who want a relationship with the spiritual, not a list of biblical verses to answer their deep questions. They want community and belonging. They want to answer their deep questions about who they are and what is their purpose. How then to I live? Why am I here? How do the spiritual and the physical intersect?

Just like the early Christian movement, it is difficult for churches today to move into a new way of being community. Early Christianity had to learn to embrace a world where the division between Jewish and Gentile was no longer relevant to faith in Jesus. We too have entered a new world. Embracing folks in the 21st century brings us remarkably close to those of our brothers and sisters of the first century in an interesting way. Paul writes that God has given him the task of communicating the gospel to Gentiles who know little of the Jewish story.

He says: *this is my life's work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. (Eph 3:7 The Message)*

Today many of those entering our congregations are tabula rasa when it comes to the bible and the Christians faith. This fact ought to help shape our worship and outreach.

Look up, lift up your eyes, asks Isaiah, and look around. Light has dawned and a new generation asks us questions about this light and what they ought to do. Are we prepared for this?

Amen