

Jesus – the Light of the World

On the 4th of July 1952, 34-year-old Florence Chadwick was an American swimmer known for long-distance open water swimming. She was the first woman to swim across the English Channel in both directions, setting a time record each time she swam it. She was also the first woman to swim the Catalina Channel, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Bosphorus (one way), and the Dardanelles (round trip). A remarkable woman.

In 1952, Florence attempted to swim the 26 miles between Catalina Island and the California coastline. As she began, she was flanked by small boats that watched for sharks and were prepared to help her if she got hurt or grew tired. After about 15 hours a thick fog set in. Florence began to doubt her ability, and she told her mother, who was in one of the boats, that she did not think she could make it. She swam for another hour before asking to be pulled out, unable to see the coastline due to the fog. As she sat in the boat, she found out she had stopped swimming just one mile away from her destination. Two months later, she tried again. The same thick fog set in, but this time she succeeded in reaching Catalina. She said that she kept a mental image of the shoreline in her mind while she swam. She later swam the Catalina channel on two additional occasions.

Similarly, when we see God clearly with our eyes of faith and know that He is there just beyond the fog, we can go the distance.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is at one of the great Jewish festivals, in fact John's gospel spends several chapters focussing on Jesus at this particular festival. It is a festival celebrating the Jewish escape from Egypt and their forty years in the wilderness. It is called the festival of the tabernacles and on the first day of the festival, there was a ceremony called the illumination of the Temple.

In the centre there were four great candelabras and when the darkness came, they were lit and their light blazed throughout the Temple and throughout Jerusalem, so that every courtyard was filled with its spectacular light, and it was an evening of festivities, where the greatest and wisest of Jewish men came and danced before the Lord and sung psalms of joy and praise while the crowds watched and cheered. This is how the festival began celebrating the deliverance of Israel and it was celebrated with light.

It's into this context, that Jesus makes his declaration, and I paraphrase his words, "You have seen the spectacular light in the Temple, you have seen how it transformed the darkness of the night into a dance, well, ' I am the

light of the world', not only for one exciting night of the year, but for all who would follow me. The light in the Temple is a brilliant light, but in the end, it flickers and dies. I am the light which lasts forever – come and follow me!"

He calls them to follow him. He says, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but he will have the light of life." Jesus is telling them that he is the very light of God, the source of all light, who has come among them and he is the light which gives them life. Just as the sun gives light and life to our world, our plants and flowers, so Jesus is the light which has come into the world to give us God's light, spiritual light.

This light is given so that we might follow him. He has come for that purpose to lead us into the light of God. The word that Jesus uses for "to follow" has several different meanings, and I share them with you for I think they give us an insight into what following Jesus might look like.

1. Of a soldier following his captain and this meaning would have been understood clearly, as the Jews looked at the well drilled Roman Army with their centurion marshalling his troops. Christians are encouraged to be like soldiers, obeying their commander and marching as to war.
2. It was often used for a slave accompanying his master. This was a term that the Apostle Paul used often in his letters, he saw himself as a slave to Christ. Jesus had bought him at a price, the price cost Jesus his own life and now Paul has a debt to pay as we all have; we say this or something similar every week in the Lord's Prayer, one translation uses the words, "forgive us our debts", forgive us for what we owe you Lord and we can never repay, all we can do is follow you and obey. However, Christians are the slaves to the most gracious master; Jesus, and it is a privilege and joy to serve Christ.
3. It was used of someone seeking out the opinion of an expert, a lawyer, a doctor, those who give wise counsel. Christians are people who guide their lives and conduct by the counsel of Christ.
4. It was used to describe those who would live within the laws of the state. They agreed to live by the laws which bring peace and harmony to the state. Christians are people who accept the law of the Kingdom and of Christ and who live by the golden rule, to love God and to love our neighbour with all our heart.
5. It is also used to describe those who listen to a wise teacher and who obey their teaching. Christians are called to listen to Christ and to put his words into action.

So, as Jesus calls men and women to follow him, and walk in the light, we get something of the original meaning of what it was to follow Christ and what does that mean for us today?

1. He calls us into his army, he is our commander that we follow. He calls us to be a servant and follow with humility. He calls us into a special relationship, he will guide us and direct us.
2. There is no doubt that we are called to serve him, if he is who claims to be, the Son of God, then our stance before him, should be on our knees in service.
3. He calls us into a relationship, where he knows the way ahead for us, his ways are perfect and we would be wise to follow them.
4. He calls us into his Kingdom and to live with all of God's people in a loving way. He calls us to listen to him as the wisest of teachers who knows what best for us.

So, he calls us to follow him and for each one of us that may look a bit different. As we are all different in character and temperament, and we are all have different skills and gifts to give – so Jesus calls us and equips us for the journey that lies ahead.

What happens when the fog comes down and the way ahead is not clear, we don't know what the coastline looks like, and we get frightened, and we want to turn back or get out of the sea and into a boat for safety, just like our swimmer?

In the 4th century there was a devotional book written called *Towards a Perfect Love*, and the writer was focussing on this very theme, he wrote, "A hound that runs after the hare only because he sees other hounds running will, when he grows weary, just sit down and rest or turn around and head home. But if he runs because he actually sees the hare, he will spare himself for weariness until he has it. It is much the same spiritually...Whoever can most intensely desire God shall most intensely experience him."

To reach God, we need to see him clearly and persevere with staying power and Jesus has made this possible for his light illuminates the path of God. Jesus came so that we might see the face of God, and we might engage with the heart of God.

Jesus was the word made flesh, that is he is God's word for our world; God visited our world in the person of Jesus, and he calls us to follow him, and when we do then his light shines upon our path way and when we

read his word and walk closely with him, in the words of the old hymn, things become clearer.

But more than that happens, for when we follow Jesus and walk in his ways, his light reflects in to our hearts; his light becomes ours.

In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, 5v16 “Let your light shine like that in the sight of men. Let them see the good things you do and praise your Father in Heaven.”

He encouraged his disciples to share their light and to shine their light so that His Father would get the glory. The light of Jesus is not something to hold to ourselves. Think of all the ways that we can shine the light of Jesus into the lives of others.

In our families, how bright is the light of Jesus in our lives for them? At work, in our community, in our church; whatever we are called to do let your light shine and what is that light?

It is the spirit of Jesus living within us; the spirit that produces the fruit of the spirit; In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul lists nine specific behaviours or lights that are given to us as followers of Jesus; love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – that result from the work of the Holy Spirit in our life.

So, the light that Jesus shone was seen in who he was, right up to his dying breath, he was shining his light, in his compassion for others, his understanding of humans, his justice and his hope.

That’s what it is to shine God's light and make a difference, it's not our words but our lives that transform people and communities. The light of Jesus is discovered in our daily walk with him, through reading his Word and prayer and allowing his spirit to work in our lives.

We will not always get it right and our light will not always shine brightly but when the fog comes down, it's then that we trust him even more, for we know that he is still with us and that his is still our commander, master, teacher and we are still in his Kingdom and that his light will shine again.

Let us go and follow Jesus into the darkness of the unknown and as we do let you light shine.