

Epiphany 2 - 16/01/22 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: **Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11**

Many of you, like me, would have been surprised to find empty shelves in some parts of our supermarkets over the last week. No toilet paper, paracetamol, or potatoes... but strangely plenty of tofu! As many people in the supply chain have had to quarantine because of COVID infection it has not been possible to pack or transport grocery items in the normal way and we are assured, by those who do the modelling, that there will be disruption for quite some more weeks. Yesterday my wife, Kate, was excited because she had been able to buy two Rapid Antigen Tests... and these have been as hard to find as hens teeth!

However, there are other parts of our economy that have been hit much harder and longer than recent weeks. One of these is the performing arts sector. For professional musicians, singers, dancers, and actors; for lighting and sound engineers, producers and directors; for theatres, pubs and clubs... the last two years have been hell. How do you put food on the table and pay the bills when you have no source of income? How do you keep practicing to maintain and develop your ability when nobody is paying you to do this? Some have got creative online, financially supported by family members, but many have left the industry to find employment elsewhere.

Live music offers something more than a recording of the same. A few years ago I was fortunate to go to watch Mumford and Sons play at the Brisbane Entertainment Centre. For those unfamiliar with this group they are a British folk-rock band with songs that have thoughtful lyrics, lots of drums, and a consistently provocative banjo. The two support artists that night were great, and quite clearly - Mumford and Sons have a big following in Brisbane. During one of the songs the musicians stopped playing and I found myself singing a cappella, along with thirteen thousand other people, these lyrics:

*"...So, give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light
'Cause oh they gave me such a fright
But I will hold on with all of my might
Just promise me we'll be alright..."*

There was such longing in the song, and the experience reminded me of an essay I'd read which suggested that for many young people, music festivals and concerts are acts of worship in a non-theistic faith! Certainly music festivals like the recent festival Woodford folk festival, offer days of intensive community enhanced by music and dance. Different generations can be present and people camp and share things together. There can be face-painting, yoga, circus skills, kite-flying and great vegetarian food together with musical performance from gifted artists in which audience members can connect with each other through singing and dance. Particular songs can express the hopes and fears of a generation, while the experience of being together can give a sense of being connected and not alone.

I wonder if being part of the Anglican Church has ever had some of these elements for you? Perhaps not the yoga, circus skills, and kite flying – though these seem to happen in some places – but the experience of singing together and being connected. The lyrics from the Mumford song certainly resonate with prayers that I have expressed over the years, both for myself and for others, *'...give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light... and, promise me we'll be alright...'*

In today's psalm we hear something of the hope in God that the people of Israel had, and this was expressed in song – that's what a psalm is. I have heard these verses sung by Cathedral choirs over years in musical settings that have been inspiring but impossible to sing along with, and I wonder what Mumford and Sons would do with these lyrics. How would these verses sound if they were accompanied by driving drums, bass, guitar, piano, and banjo?

*"Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike... For with you is the fountain of life; **in your light we see light.**"*

That last phrase is powerful, *'In your light we see light...'*. *'In your light (God) we see light...'* How do you and I understand this affirmation, and what could it mean in our time and context?

In this, I can't help but be reminded of the words attributed to Jesus in John's Gospel (John 8:12) where he said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life..."* As people who have faith in Christ there is then the potential to ask the question what light does Christ bring to our darkness? Whether it is a very personal experience of darkness – like grief or depression; a community experience of darkness – like drought and recession; a societal experience of darkness – like the rate of violence against women in Australia; or a global experience of darkness – like the ongoing reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. What light does Christ bring to these personal, communal, societal and global experiences of darkness?

Please bring to your mind an area of darkness that burdens you – it could be personal, communal, societal, or global. What light; what hope; what transformation do you long for Christ to bring to that?

Please think about this for a few moments... and if you have a clear sense of an answer please offer that in prayer. But, if you don't have a sense of what light, hope, or transformation would look like in this please offer that in prayer. The words from that Mumford song could even be a helpful prayer: *'(God)...give me hope in the darkness that I will see the light 'cause oh (this gives) me such a fright. But I will hold on with all of my might. Just promise me we'll (all) be alright...'*

Let's sit with this for about thirty seconds... and, then I'll close with prayer.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and your love. We give thanks for music that inspires, and questions that deepen faith. We offer to you the things that trouble us, and in your grace... ask for light and hope. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.