

Over recent centuries, the civilised world has developed a concept that prompted E.M. Forster to passionately remark: "It is the one orderly product our middling race has produced. It is the cry of a thousand sentinels, the echo from a thousand labyrinths, it cannot be hidden .....it is the best evidence we can give of our dignity." The 'orderly product' to which he is referring is a lighthouse. Lighthouses are those great edifices of coast and open sea that have become enduring symbols of security, reliability, constancy, physical and psychological safety.

Before the presence of lighthouses sailing at night could be a perilous experience, especially in stormy conditions. By night there were no points of reference from which to take bearings, land could often not be seen and establishing an accurate position was impossible. But even more terrifying were the potential presence of rocks and other sunken hazards lurking beneath the sea which, in a matter of a few moments could wreck a ship and destroy many lives. By day their structure is visible, sometimes quite strikingly, but by night it is only known by its powerful beam of light sweeping across the water.

However, as most mariners know well, when sailing far out at sea, the source of light is not always the first thing that is seen. The first visual contact is made with what is often referred to as "the loom of the light". The lighthouse and its full light source may be just beyond the horizon and not immediately visible but the light can be seen as a sweep of light scattered upward, reflecting on particles of water vapour. This is the "loom of the light". It is often the first glimpse of the light and a sight that brings joy and relief to the mariner, for land is near and a bearing can soon be taken. The vessel draws closer; the full beam of the light comes into view; bearings can be checked; the mariner knows where he is.

A lighthouse is indeed, one of the true hallmarks of civilisation. In the nineteenth century, western Christians adopted it as a powerful symbol of salvation and Divine presence in the world. The concept of the lighthouse sharply points up our deep human need for light. It is not surprising that these remarkable buildings have joined the rich vocabulary of light symbolism. So much of our understanding of ourselves and the world finds varied expression in symbols and metaphors of vision and especially of light. Light equates with awareness, seeing, clarity, truth and spiritual knowledge. Light is certainly not exclusive to one tradition or another, but is a metaphor found in all of them. In fact, it seems to be a universal symbol of enlightenment and hope.

Light has such power for us because we are so reliant upon it and human life would be inconceivable without it. Light is also a strong metaphor for mystery because the nature of light itself is very mysterious. After centuries of scientific investigation, light still does not readily give up its secrets. As physicists have observed to their great frustration, sometimes light behaves as particles, sometimes it behaves as waves. White light, when projected through a prism opens up into a magical spectrum of colours. Somehow, the phenomenon of white light that we take so much for granted in our lives holds great beauty and great mystery.

The Christian faith is steeped in the metaphorical power of light. The poetry of the New Testament is full of such metaphors. The metaphor of light is at its most powerful when it refers to Jesus. He is described as the Light of Light; Jesus as the Light of the World; Jesus, a lamp shining in a dark place. Jesus makes it clear that anyone who follows him will never walk in darkness. Light is a good metaphor for Jesus; for we must remember

that for many, Jesus provided a whole new idea of God. Back in the first century, just as today, there were actually many who saw God as either non-existent or an angry, jealous, negative force. But Jesus lifted up the highest and best perceptions of the Hebrew prophets who spoke of a loving, relational God. God is love and so love stands at the centre of the universe. Light was and still is, the best and most powerful metaphor by which to express this love.

Light is the instrument of an epiphany. It lovingly illuminates what was once dark; it reveals things that were hidden; and so it is with love. From a spiritual perspective it could be said that if you cannot see something through the light of love then you cannot see it at all. The manifestation of light is a mystical call to all of us to look and understand the world in a loving way.

Our world has been made sacred by the light of Jesus Christ. We may expect that his light will come to us through friendships, worship, or through our contemplation of the material world. But his light may well come to us unexpectedly and obliquely perhaps through art, music or literature, or through life's great challenges - the sick, the poor, the dispossessed, even our own misfortunes. In fact it is undoubtedly the light that illuminates every dimension of life if only we could see it.

In the Letter to the Hebrews (1:3) we read that "the Son is the radiance of God's Glory and the exact representation of God's very being". The word for radiance was used for sunlight streaming from the sun. In other Biblical versions Jesus' radiance is described as "effulgence". It is a wonderful but under-used word meaning to shine forth brilliantly. The radiance of Jesus' glory means that he is "the loom of the light". The loom of God's light. Just as in the lighthouse metaphor, the light and its loom cannot be separated from each other, so it is with Jesus and God.

So it is a light that suffuses all things, but of course, human nature being what it is, we do our best to obscure it and sometimes fail to see its loom even when it manifests itself to us. In many of our well-intentioned efforts to practice our religion - to 'get it all together for God' - we so often obscure the light rather than let it shine. Sometimes we create distractions, or deliberately allow ourselves to be side-tracked in things like the minutiae of church life or liturgy. These things can become 'false lights' (to adopt another old maritime term) that can lead us away from the radiance of the real thing.

But the light of Jesus Christ is a light that cannot be extinguished or easily shut out once we have seen it. Once we have made contact with the loom of the light in the dark, stormy seas of life it is difficult not to be drawn towards it. I once read the following poetic words, from an unknown source, about the nature of light: "light gives of itself freely, filling all available space. It does not seek anything in return: it asks not whether you are friend or foe. It only gives of itself and is not thereby diminished." Those words could not be a bettered as a description of the Light of Christ from which we take our bearings.

In our spiritual journey there is much that seems hidden and divine light sometimes seems to be concealed from us, especially in our darkest moments. So it is always an inner lighthouse that we seek to give us a bearing and naturally, we look for one that shines brightly. We look and wait for an epiphany. But first we must be alert and look out for the loom of the light.

Mark Lewis

Readings: Joshua 3: 1-8 Heb. 1:1-12