

Message for September 19, 2021

Omagh's 183rd Anniversary

John 1:1-14

Have you ever had the experience of going to a world-famous landmark which did not, for whatever reason, live up to your expectations? While I have never seen it, this is how many people I know have reacted to the famous Statue of Liberty in New York City. I don't know how many people have told me that "It's so small! I expected to see something far larger!" And then again there are those places that do live up to our expectations and more.

One such place for me is Peggy's Cove, and especially its famous lighthouse sitting on the massive rocks. It doesn't matter whether I was there on a sunny or foggy day, that place has always enthralled me. But of course we also have some beautiful lighthouses closer to home. I think of some of those located on the shores of Lake Huron for example and especially those around Tobermory such as Big Tub, Cove Island, Cabot Head and Flowerpot Island. Truly there is something almost magical about lighthouses that appeals to our imaginations, and so perhaps it is not inappropriate that lighthouses are sometimes used as a Christian symbol, especially in light of some of the imagery used to describe Jesus himself.

This morning's scripture passage is the famous Prologue to John's gospel, and it sets out many of its themes. Writing of Jesus, John said: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it". Later in the Prologue, John went on to write: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world".

This theme of Jesus being the light is picked up by Jesus himself later in that gospel: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness". And of course there is also the famous: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life".

This theme or image of Jesus being the Light of the World is certainly an appropriate one. Jesus for example came to shed his light upon us, teaching us how to live and how to get the most out of life. All too often people think that their true peace and happiness lies in doing what they want regardless of the

feelings and needs of others. Not so said Jesus, true happiness, peace, and contentment are to be found by following the light of his teaching and example. But Jesus of course isn't just the light for life here and now; he is also the light that proclaims that in the darkness of death, there is indeed a life yet to come. As he famously said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever believes in me shall never die".

Truly Jesus is the Light and is like a lighthouse shining in the darkness, but of course what describes him should also describe us as well. As Jesus said in his famed Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world". This is what we and the church are called to be; we are the light or, if we prefer, we are to be like lighthouses. In a world that all too often seems to have lost its way, we shine in the darkness striving to proclaim the light of Christ's teaching by both word and deed. In a world where so many people lack so much, we strive to help fill some of the needs. We do so for example through such as our contributions to Presbyterians Sharing which supports the work of the larger church. We also shine through our support of PWS, Presbyterian World Service and Development, which works to alleviate some of the needs of the Third World. Closer to home we have supported Evangel Hall, our denomination's inner-city mission in Toronto that works with many who are homeless. Even more closer to home, we have supported the Salvation Army as it strives to meet the needs of the less well-off of our own community. Indeed, without being the least bit egotistical about it, this church's light shines through me; by supporting a minister, other ministries can and do happen in our community. We may be a small church family here at Omagh, but we have, and still try to do our part to shine in the darkness. As I have sometimes said, we punch above our weight. But while we let our light shine, acting like a lighthouse by the things we do, we also shine in yet another way as well and that is through this very building itself.

If only because they are so expensive to build and maintain, there has been a great deal of debate in recent years about the role and purpose of church buildings. At one end of the spectrum are those who believe that we should get rid of the church buildings altogether; why think of the ministries that could be supported with that money! At the other end of the spectrum are those for whom the building is the end all and be all; one would almost think that the

congregation exists to serve the building and not the other way around. The truth however is to be found somewhere in the middle since a building does provide a place to worship and may be used by other groups in the community. The building however doesn't just serve as a lighthouse through its use; it also serves as a lighthouse by its very existence.

As we are constantly reminded, we are now living in what is called "the post-Christian era" and the statistics certainly bear this out. While the vast majority of Canadians still identify themselves as Christians, the truth is that fewer and fewer people have any real connection with organized religion at all whether it be Christian or another faith. In fact, the fastest growing group of people in our society today are those who identify themselves as non-religious. In such a world, our church buildings do have a vital role to play. It doesn't matter whether it be a great big cathedral with a spire reaching to the sky or a smaller building such as our own, by their very existence churches silently bear witness to the world that God exists, that Jesus is his son, and that there is more to life than the here and now. To put it another way, borrowing from military imagery, churches are God's boots on the ground. This came home to me a few years ago.

It was a Sunday morning here at Omagh and when I stepped outside to greet people following the service, I noticed two young women in their late teens or early twenties off to the side, huddled against the front of the church. They were sitting on the ground and were obviously upset. When I asked them what was wrong, they told me their story. They had been at a party the night before somewhere north of Toronto and while there they had met a couple of young men who were from Milton. They invited the two of them back to town with them, an invitation that they accepted even though the men were complete strangers. They ended up in a house somewhere in town where, before long, they realized that they had made a terrible mistake and fled. Totally lost, they wandered all over until somehow they ended up here, feeling scared, bewildered and unsure of where to go and what to do. They were looked after, but the point of this little episode is this: they knew that they could go to a church and that there, that here, they would find help.

That Sunday morning this very building itself served as a lighthouse shining in the darkness, showing the way to help and safety. That is what this congregation started to do back in 1838 and that is what it has been doing ever

since. In the beginning we were the church of the pioneers, and if we don't think that the first settlers here didn't need the light offered by Christ and this church, then all we have to do is read what is written on some of the tombstones in our cemetery. Then we became the church of the settled countryside. And now? The countryside and the world around us are changing before our very eyes but while some things may change, some things do not. One constant is Christ, the Light of the World, and the other is our role; to shine in the world around us. Being the good Presbyterians that we are, we have the Burning Bush on the sign just outside the front door. Now I am not for one moment saying that we should ever change it, but truly this symbol could just as appropriately be a lighthouse.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we now come to you in prayer on this, the last Sunday of summer and this church family's 183rd anniversary.

We thank you for this season drawing to its close, and also for the season of beauty and harvest that will soon be upon us.

We thank you for this land and nation in which we live, and that we have the right to choose those who exercise power over us. With tomorrow's election in mind, help us to follow our beliefs and conscience, that we may choose wisely and well.

We thank you for what it is that we celebrate here this morning: 183 years of witness. We thank you for those who have gone before us, many of whom we have known and loved. Grant that we may be inspired by their examples of faith and sacrifice.

We thank you for your Son, the foundation upon which your church and this very congregation itself is built. He came as the Light of the World and in his love he has entrusted his ministry to us. We thank you for this, praying that through your Spirit you will help us, individually and collectively, to shine as well.

We pray for your light in the many places and situations where there is so much darkness; the darkness of illness, grief, want, violence and fear.

We pray for your light in our society as the Fourth Wave continues. May the ill find healing, the grieving find comfort, and that those whose task it is to heal and comfort find the strength and comfort to do so. We especially remember this day the people of Alberta with the threat of their healthcare system being totally overwhelmed. Through your light bring us through the darkness of the present time.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen