

Drawn to the Light of Christ

Series: The Light on the Hill - Vision and Strategy 2026

Date: 19 November 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Genesis 18:1-8; Hebrews 13:1-2; Revelation 3:20; Matthew 11:28-30

In the 2021 census over 38% of Australians said that they had no religion. This was more than the number of people of any other group - Roman Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Muslim or whatever. Tasmania is the most secular state in the country, with over 49% stating they have no religion. In Battery Point that number is 53%. Interestingly 14% of people in Battery Point identified as Anglican on the census. That translates to 297 people. I wonder where they all are?! The number of people with no religion has been on the rise and the number of people identifying as Christian has been declining since the 60s. Some of you might remember the days of your youth when churches were packed to the gunnels and wonder what has happened. Where has everyone gone? I hope you're not just asking that question but the more important question, how do we get them back? I hope we ask that question, not because we want the church to regain its place of influence and power in society, but rather for the sake of those who aren't here. We're beggars leading other beggars to water. In Jesus we've found the wellspring of life. He is the Light of the World, the way to God and we want to share that with our friends and neighbours.

People might not identify as Christian, but we're as spiritually hungry as ever. We have a sense that for all our material prosperity there is something missing. The social conflict and polarisation, the rates of mental illness and suicide in Western culture tell us that all is not well with our souls. My experience at St George's tells me this is true. People visit us every week seeking to connect with God. The question of how we reverse the trend of decline in Christianity in Australia begins with how do we welcome those we encounter who are spiritually hungry. We could look at whizz bang strategies and high level trends and statistics, but it seems to me that this is one of those moments where Jesus tell us the answer. It's very simple, but it involves the reorientation of the whole of our lives.

Last week we started a four week look at our vision and strategy for us as St George's for the next 4 years. Last week we saw how God has called us to be the Light on the Hill. Christ is the Light of the World, through him we can know God and become his daughters and sons. Christ calls us to shine his light and we hold him out as the light. Our mission is to see people *drawn to the Light of Christ, transformed by the light of Christ and sent out to shine the light of Christ*. This week we're looking at the first of those movements. How will people be drawn to the light of Christ? What can we do to draw to the light of Christ? The first thing I want to say is that ultimately this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who calls people and draws them to Christ. None of us is able to

change the human heart. If we think we can, we'll come across as coercive and unpleasant. But the Holy Spirit is in the business of working through his people. The church is the means by which God calls us to Christ. The Holy Spirit gives each of us gifts with which to serve so that together we build his body.

St George's stands as a beacon of hope over Hobart. It's imprinted on the Hobart psyche. Since 1847 our tower has stood as an arrow pointing people to heaven and drawing people to worship. Our city loves the building and the building draws visitors through the week. The question is: how do we meet those who come who are spiritually hungry? *We offer a warm welcome that invites people to meet Jesus.*

Our theme text for this week is Genesis 18, where three strangers come to Abraham's tent. Abraham sees them. He goes out to meet them. He bows down before them, showing them respect and honour. He offers them water, freshly baked bread and a choice calf. Not leftovers, but the best of his food. There's no expectation they will stay, but shows this lavish hospitality to nourish them for their journey. While they eat he stands waiting to meet their needs. That tradition of hospitality is still alive and well in the middle east. Sadly, it's something that we've let go of somewhat in our busy, individualistic, technological world. This is hospitality outside of expectations of efficiency and profit. It's slow time, freely given. Abraham is attentive to the needs of the strangers, who have now become his guests. He's not distracted by his smart phone or other tasks. They are his focus.

We visited some friends in the UK who've been there for a number of years. Sadly they've not enjoyed their time. One of the most tragic things we heard from them was that when they went to church lots of people said to them, "It would be lovely to have you over," but no one actually followed through. And they realised that this was what people said to politely end a conversation and actually it meant the exact opposite of what was said. My friend's experience was doubly sad because in Hebrews we read,

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Hospitality is a point where we as the church are called to be counter cultural. This text offers a tremendous encouragement to us. You never know who it is who you welcome. It may be an angel or even God himself in disguise.

One of my favourite art works, if not my favourite, is a 15th century icon of this scene from Abraham's life by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev. So far we've looked at Abraham's hospitality, but Rublev draws our attention to the opening words of the scene.

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

It turns out that in welcoming these three strangers Abraham in fact welcomed God himself. This moment in Abraham's life becomes a window into the mystery of the Trinity. And so Rublev has the three figures sitting at table. There is so much to say about this icon. It's an arresting image that invites meditation. For our purposes, let me draw your attention to just 4 points.

1. The three angels represent the three persons of the Trinity. The Father is on the left. The Son in the middle. The Holy Spirit on the right. The colours of each figures' robes tell us this. Blue represents divinity. The figure on the left is mainly gold, symbolising how the divinity of the Father is hidden in his glory. The figure in the middle has red and blue robes. Red symbolises humanity, so this is the Son, both fully God and fully man. The figure on the right is clothed with blue and green. Green symbolises life, and the Holy Spirit is the giver of life.
2. Notice how if you look at all three figures, your eye slides from one to the other in a circle. This indicates the unity of the Trinity, one God, in three persons. Three persons in one God.
3. But, you'll also see that there is a space between the three, and it's where you as the viewer stand. This indicates God's invitation to you and me to join in his own life.
4. Finally, there is what looks like a cup on the table and in fact if you trace the shape between the figures on the left and right you'll see that it is a cup. This again points to God's hospitality extended to us, shown in the Lord's Supper. That God invites us to share in the table of his Son whose body was broken that we might have life and whose blood was shed that we might be forgiven.

That invitation to God's own table points to Jesus' own words in Revelation 3.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

What an extraordinary invitation! To open the door of our hearts to Christ, and to eat with him, and he with us. Jesus invites each of us to open that door. If you're hear and you have not opened the door of your heart to him, do hear his promise to you today. He's patiently waiting for you to let him in, even as he invites you to eat with him, to share in his heavenly feast. We'll have a chance later in the service to taste that heavenly banquet as we share in the Lord's supper. Maybe today is the day for you to open the door to Christ and join in the feast.

We began with our welcome to strangers as a moment to encounter God and have come to God's welcome to us. I hope this perspective transforms how you see that call to welcome those who come through our doors. Your welcome can be a moment for you to encounter God and, at the same time, for those whom you welcome to encounter God. It's my prayer that the Holy Spirit

would do that work amongst us to draw people to the Light of Christ as we extend that warm welcome.

I've tried to sketch a vision of what our welcome might be. But let's move to what concretely that looks like in our strategy as a church.

First, we extend that welcome and invitation to our neighbours and our city through our Big 4 events through the year: Christmas, Pancake Tuesday, Easter and the Baldwin Lecture. While every church service is an occasion of public worship where all are welcome, in these 4 events we deliberately invite our neighbours with postcards, (and I hope your own personal invites!) to join us in celebrating Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, to break bread with us at Pancakes and to hear something of the salt and light that Christ offers our world in the Baldwin lecture.

Second, we build a more connected church community through parish lunches and working bees as we eat and work together. We've seen how sharing a meal is a profound moment of welcome and friendship. We aim to alternate between a parish lunch and newcomers lunch on the 3rd Sunday of each month. Speaking of which, if you're new, come to our place for lunch today! I'd also love to get a monthly morning tea between the 8am and 10am services. Thank you so much to Kevin for helping build our church family with your coffee van each week! Our beautiful garden offers a taste of Eden and indeed the new creation to our neighbours, and we grow together as we work in God's garden in our monthly working bees on the 4th Saturday of the month. Thank you to Ken for leading that ministry. We finish these with a barbecue. Feel free to invite neighbours or friends to join us for the working bee and barbecue. There's one next Saturday!

Third, we will implement a clear 'engagement pathway' with intentional opportunities for faith decisions. You can see that on page 14 of the vision booklet. This shows the various ways we might encounter people, how we can welcome them and what we will do to help people experience the light of Christ, to take steps closer to him and to respond to his call on our lives. Deeper Conversations is a book club looking at the intersection of faith and culture. Alpha is an overview of the Christian life, what we believe and what we do. The course offers several invitations to make a whole-of-life commitment to Christ. We aim to run this in Term 2 each year.

Fourth, as people take steps closer to Christ, we will clearly communicate the beauty of Christ and the basics of the Christian faith through our baptism and confirmation courses. Jesus' final command to his disciples was to make disciples of all nations by baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that he

commanded. We continue to obey that command. Baptism is a sign of God's grace to us and our belonging to him. It defines who we are as Christians. Confirmation is for those baptised as infants to learn what it means to be a Christian, and to own it for themselves. There are three parts to this - the head, the hands and the heart. The head is about what we believe, summarised in the creeds that we say each week. The hands is about how we live, summarised in the 10 commandments. The heart is about our relationship with God, these are the spiritual disciplines of Church, Prayer, Word and Sacrament.

Since I've been at St George's, we've not done well in this 4th area, teaching the basics of the Christian faith through baptism and confirmation. In the early church catechumenate, or those wanting to become disciples of Christ, were given 100-300 hours of Christian instruction. We're not quite aiming for that, but we do as clergy really want to invest in training new Christians deeply in the faith, so that they can give themselves to a lifetime of Christian service and witness. This takes to the second and third movements of our mission - to see people transformed by the light of Christ and sent out to shine the light of Christ, and we'll have more on that over the next 2 weeks.

For today though, what part can you play in these 4 strategies to offer a warm welcome to people so that they meet Jesus? As we offer that welcome, we do so knowing that only do so because God has first offered his welcome to us in Christ. We pray that his Spirit may use our moments of welcome to be encounters with God himself - that we may honour him and that others may receive his welcome.