Christmas

THE NEW SHOFAR

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ***Romans 13:12***

Hannukah – one light at a time

The Christian feast of Christmas and the Jewish feast of Hanukah always occur around the same time and in terms of theological symbols, both celebrate by using the symbol of light. the theme The festival reminds Jews of a time over 2,000 years ago, when the Jews won a battle against the Greeks to practise their religion freely. The Greeks had banned all Jewish rituals. King Antiochus tried to make Jewish people bow down in front of a statue of him that had been put in the Jewish temple, and pray to Greek Gods, but they refused. A small group of Jews called the Maccabees fought against this and, after a three-year war, they won. However, their Jewish temple had been destroyed. They cleaned and repaired the temple. Then, to celebrate the victory, an oil lamp was lit in it. There was only enough oil to burn the candle for one day, but miraculously it burned for eight days. This is why the Hanukkah festival lasts for eight days and why light is of such importance in the celebration. It was the light that burns midst the darkness of hatred.

The light in Hanukkah symbolises miracles, but also hope, religious freedom, and the triumph of good over evil. It is a feast of courage, of standing tall in the face of pagan persecution and in the darkness that the world around them sought to impose on them. When all appeared to be lost and Evil victorious, they rededicated the Temple to celebrate the victory of God as all around them stood in ruins. That single candle burned for eight days instead of one, representing how a small spark of spiritual light can overcome great darkness. It signifies God's presence and everything good and great that comes from discovering that the Almighty had never left them on their own. Thus it is a celebration of the enduring human soul, and the duty to "spread the light" by sharing kindness and faith, illuminating the world's darkness.

On being God's lamplighters in the world's darkness

There is a famous Hasidic story, told of a conversation between the rabbi and one particular member of his community. The man once asked: "Rabbi, what is a Jew's task in this world?" The rabbi answered: "A Jew is a lamp-lighter on the streets of the world. In olden days, there was a person in every town who would light the gas street lamps with a light he carried on the end of a long pole. On the street corners, the lamps sat, ready to be lit. A lamp-lighter has a pole with a flame supplied by the town. He knows that the fire is not his own and he goes around lighting the lamps on his route." The man then asked: "But what if the lamp is in a desolate wilderness?" The rabbi responded: "Then, too,

one must light it. Let it be noted that there is a wilderness and let the wilderness be shamed by the light." Not satisfied, the man asked: "But what if the lamp is in the middle of the sea?" to which the rabbi responded: "Then one must take off one's clothes, jump into the water, and light it there!"

"And **that** is the Jew's mission?" asked the man. The rabbi thought for a long moment and finally responded: "Yes, that is a Jew's calling." The man continues – "But rabbi, I see no lamps." The rabbi responds: "That is because you are not yet a lamp-lighter." So, the man inquires: "How does one become a lamplighter?" The rabbi's answer this time? "One must begin with oneself, cleansing oneself, becoming more refined, then one is able to see the other as a source of light, waiting to be ignited. When, heaven forbid, one is crude, then one sees but crudeness; but, when one is noble, one sees nobility."

Christ – God's Light shining divine love into the darkness of hatred

Christianity itself began in the crucible of persecution, seeking to find a way in the world as the despotic tyrant Herod sought to stifle God's saving works by ordering the massacre of all male babies two years of age and under. As the birth of the Messiah was immanent, Mary was rejected from the inn, forced to find a place of rejection among the animals in the stable. Darkness, pain and suffering are the uncomfortable bedfellows of men and women of faith.

The fact that the Jews did not despair of lighting the menorah the first day is an incredible message to us all. They knew that there was obviously not enough oil and none for the morrow. They could not possibly fulfill the Torah's commandment to light a perpetual lamp. And still, they refused to give up hope for tomorrow. For the Jewish people, God was always at work in their midst, and because God was working away to bring the divine plans to fruition, there is always hope.

For Christians, Christmas is the fulfilling of this yearning, this Hope in God's goodness and love. If those early Christians had the opportunity of looking into the future, they may well have been tempted to give up in despair. Cry out in anguish. Following on from Herod, they would have seen the execution of this Child, the martyrdom of the Apostles, persecution of endless fellow believers, countless exiles into foreign lands, suffering and martyrdom at the hands of generations of tyrants like Herod and the Roman Emperors and in modern times the daunting conditions threatening those striving to live as faithful lamp lighters for Christ.

The opening chapter of the Gospel of John says all we need to know about Christmas and proclaims the antidote to the kind of barbarity to sought to stymie the faith celebrations at Bondi: *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* It is now up to each one of us to choose the Light over the darkness, to be the bearers of light in dark times rather than among those seeking to snuff Light out.