

The Revd Stephen Ashley-Emery RN
Deputy Chaplain of the Fleet

Let us pray. Father may the words of my mouth, the thoughts in our minds and feelings in our hearts be acceptable to you. I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You will have gathered from my accent that I am not from around these parts. Where I am from it is tradition to preach for forty minutes, but you will be glad to know I won't be doing that today. The very first time I preached in the west coast of Scotland, I remembered starting and working my way through the sermon when I saw a hand being raised in the air by one of the congregation. I wasn't sure what was happening, so I continued in what I was delivering, only to have another and then another that amounted to a fair amount. Internally I was perturbed and kept thinking, what have I said or done that has upset them. Once the service was finished, I asked the minister in the vestry what was wrong. He replied, I am sorry I should have made you aware of this custom, if an elder agrees with you then they raise their hands in approval.

Today, we gather to reflect on the legacy of a truly remarkable figure in British naval history - Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, you know him as the man whose deeds and victories at sea have left an indelible mark on our collective memory. Among the countless tales of his heroic exploits, there is one that stands out above all for me- the legendary "Nelson's Touch."

Nelson's Touch was not just a tactic employed in battle, but a reflection of his exceptional leadership, tactical genius, and unwavering determination to achieve victory against all odds. It referred to his ability to inspire his men to perform at their best, to push through adversity, and to secure glorious victories on the high seas.

As Deputy Chaplain of the Fleet, my responsibility in the Royal Navy Chaplaincy Service is to sustain the strategic and tactical delivery of the Royal Navy's moral component of operational capability, this is done by the means of a chaplaincy service that is professionally trained, adaptable, agile, and effective by its presence and delivery

So, when I consider the history and foundation set by Lord Nelson's leadership I am humbled at the expectation from history and the example I am to follow.

Beyond his military achievements, Lord Nelson's humility, compassion, and sense of duty set him apart as a truly exceptional individual. What went against the grain of traditional leadership of his time was the fact he cared deeply for his sailors, leading by example and earning their loyalty and trust as a result. His famous words, "England expects that every man will do his duty," remain a powerful reminder of the importance of courage, selflessness, and unity in the face of adversity; How he and his SC were to do this is revealed in Nelson Prayer

"May the Great God, whom I worship, grant to my country and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious victory, and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it; and may humanity after victory be the predominant feature in the British fleet."

You see, He believed in his SC, he believed in his country, but he primarily believed in God and followed, in his own human way, his faith. I certainly get the sense that Nelson deeply felt everything he believed concretely with that defiant undertone against any element of risk

For his Sc I am sure there were some who were sceptical and scared. It is naturally human, certainly in our culture, for the need to be convinced first before trusting and therefore believing. We are told that actions speak louder than words this why use that old adage, seeing is believing.

Seeing is believing – is a saying attributed to Thomas Fuller, the English Priest, a puritan, historian, and a writer with a doctorate in Divinity from Cambridge. We are particularly familiar with the first half of his saying, but the second part is never mentioned, perhaps because it's less snappy and more puzzling.

It is tempting to use 'Seeing is believing' as an Epiphany slogan: because this is the season of eyes being opened, from the Magi seeing Christ in his beginning, to Simeon and Anna seeing him at its end, via the seeing of the Spirit at his baptism, and the seeing of the signs in his ministry.

But what does this 'seeing' really amount to? For every one of those who sees, in our Epiphany scriptures, there must have been some who didn't – or rather, people who saw the same things, but who did not see their meaning.

Conversely, there may have been others that seeing is so crucial to their believing that they cannot get past the visual sense, to the reality which lies beyond it: I am sure you will recall Jesus e.g. saying to Thomas, who has insisted on seeing, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe'.

Thomas Fuller's entire saying is, "Seeing is believing, feeling is truth." It points to something we often overlook in our hyper-rational and cynical age: ultimately, it's the heart that leads us toward the truth.

But please don't misunderstand my meaning, seeing with feeling is not just that warm Christmas glow, continuing into the chill of January as we carry on celebrating the Incarnation. The heart lead us to the truth, some would take their lead from the second century theologian Origen, when he said, that the "faculties of the heart" must be transformed in our walk with Christ.

Others prefer to take it deeper and follow Schleiermacher's call to understand it as 'a sense and taste for the Infinite'.

To unpack 'feeling is truth' I find myself leaning towards Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), and his reflection upon the Christian faith and what it means to believe, he wrote "Only love can believe (the Resurrection)." The heart and the soul need something other than certainty or "speculative intelligence." They will only take us so far.

In the end, "It is love that believes (the Resurrection)." A love that "holds fast" even to the Resurrection. You see, love transfigures what we see and believe or believe and then come to see

So, we might glean a fuller sense of the Epiphany seeing, if we add in the second half of Fuller's truism: this kind of seeing involves feeling, too – feeling which guides our believing towards the truth. This morning's readings point clearly to that seeing and feeling of the truth being in Christ's presence, i.e., the love of God and what it amounts to, then, now, forever and for all.

Isaiah 60, the passage prophetically paints the truth about the light and glory of God shining upon His people, symbolizing divine favour, love and present.

The text speaks of the restoration and salvation of God's people, bringing them out of darkness and into His marvellous light.

Isaiah prophesies about the nations coming to the light of God and being drawn to worship Him.

And then it the passage describes a time of abundance and prosperity for God's people as they receive blessings from Him. The fulfilment of God's promises and prophecies in this passage highlights His faithfulness and sovereignty. Schleiermacher may say to us, sense and taste the infinite.

The words of Ephesians 3:1-12 streams into our seeing in the feeling of the mystery of Christ, which was not fully revealed in previous generations but is now made known. This passage emphasizes the inclusion of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, in God's plan of salvation through Christ. Origen's plea would be, know that the faculties of God's heart calls you to walk with him.

God's plan affirmed we see it in Matthew 2:1-12, as we hear of the visit of the Magi to Jesus, the fulfilment of prophecy, the recognition of Jesus as the King, the presence of divine guidance, and the offering of gifts to honour and worship Jesus. You feel the love of God who loves the world, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son and that whoever believes in him shall not perish but will receive eternal life; his compassion poured out in the universal nature of Jesus's significance. Because the heart and the soul need something other than certainty or "speculative intelligence" for they will only take us so far. As Wittgenstein noted, in the end, "It is love that believes" In the vulnerability of the Christ child, love holds fast.

The seeing and feeling of the Epiphany is the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is a celebration of the manifestation of God's presence in the world through Jesus and the acceptance of his message by people of different backgrounds, cultures and life's situations. As Lord Nelson put it in his prayer for the task of the fleet, may humanity after victory be the predominant feature.

For Humanity to be the predominant feature we need to first take Origen's challenge as he calls for the "faculties of the heart" to be transformed in our walk with Christ and where believing is seeing, what Schleiermacher calls 'a sense and taste for the Infinite'.

The epiphany reveals to us, seeing is believing, but feeling is truth is the love of God incarnate. It is love that believes in you, humanity. Its His love transfigures what we see and believe, or believe and then come to see

As we pay tribute to Lord Nelson's memory, Nelson's touch reminds us to believe life is worth battling for, the importance of courage, selflessness, and unity in the face of adversity, because there is hope.

Hope is to be found, do you see it in the Epiphany scriptures where you hear the word of God revealing his love, a love that transfigures, a love that holds fast. Seeing is believing, feeling is truth. Amen.