

I am the Light of the World
John 8:12

Late September 1991 the fishing boat *Andrea Gail* sailed from Gloucester, Massachusetts some 600kms into the Atlantic Ocean. A cold front moving down from Canada combined with a large pressure system from the west together with the aftermath of hurricane Grace in the south east created the perfect storm. Ferocious winds and huge waves reduced the boat to matchwood and the six crew members were lost at sea. No doubt there had been prior perfect storms, but this was made famous by the book and film of the same title.

Two thousand years ago Jesus faced his own perfect storm as various pressures from a human perspective converged on Jerusalem of his day. The westerly gale was the new superpower Rome. Julius Caesar had centralized power. After his assassination he was divinised and his successors declared son of God and assumed the role of pontifex maximus (high priest). Augustus Caesar ruled from 31BC to AD14. After his death he too was declared divine and his successor Tiberius took the same titles. The job of the Roman governor in Palestine was to keep the peace, administer justice, collect taxes and suppress unrest. This was the westerly gale, the first element in the perfect storm confronting Jesus.

The second great element was the high-pressure system of Jewish nationalism and expectations in which they looked forward to a golden age of freedom, justice and peace. The great story of the Exodus gave them hope. The Jews lived on the hope that it would happen again. Tyrants like Rome could do their worst, but God would deliver them. It was this great hope of Jewish expectations that caused the second storm wind. However, it takes more than strong wind to create the perfect storm. The hurricane claims of Jesus by way of his sevenfold "I am" statements asserting divinity, met head on the cruel westerly wind of a pagan empire and the high pressure of Jewish nationalism, thereby creating the perfect storm.

Jesus' great statement "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12) was made shortly after the Feast of Tabernacles in the court yard of the temple where the imposing ceremonies associated with the feast were held. The first ceremony saw the priests of Israel process to the Pool of Siloam and draw water in golden pitchers whereupon they returned and poured the water on the altar of sacrifice each morning of the eight-day feast. The people were thereby reminded of God's provision of water during their forty-year wilderness wanderings. It also pointed forward to spiritual water God would provide on the day of his visitation.

The second ceremony was similar. On the first night of the feast, probably on succeeding nights as well, after sunset two great lamps were lit. They were said to have lit up the entire city, symbolizing the pillar of cloud and fire that accompanied the people in the desert. The cloud that protected the Israelites from Pharaoh's army on the night before crossing the Red Sea, guided them through the wilderness, offering shade by day and warmth by night when temperatures ranged respectively from intense heat to below freezing.

The cloud symbolized three things:

- i. God's Presence
The cloud offering light suggested a theophany. But the cloud of God's glory had long departed from Israel. In Jesus God was once again among his people.
- ii. God's Protection
Without the cloud the people would have perished in the wilderness. Without God's miraculous provision the people would have died.
- iii. God's Guidance
The cloud was the primary means of guidance in the desert. When the cloud moved, they broke camp and moved with it. When the cloud remained in one place, they pitched their tents. Likewise, Jesus as the light of the world, is the one who protects and guides. When he moves before us, we move too. When he stands still, we stand still as well.

However, there is a caveat to the above. God's presence, protection and guidance are for those who follow him. Jesus said "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". The question is, are we following him? Not to follow is to be cast upon our own resources and pay the price of our folly. As we keep in step with him, we experience the true blessing of his presence, protection and guidance.