

"The Light Shineth in the Darkness"

by

Neville Jayaweera (Extracted from Sunday Island 25 October 1998)

Emblazoned across the crest of St John's College, Jaffna is their luminous motto in Latin, "Lux in Tenebris Lucet", which translates into English as "The Light Shineth in Darkness". A darkness has rarely descended on our land that has been more dense and seemingly more immovable than the one that has settled over Jaffna and the Tamil people these past few decades. It is a darkness rendered the more intolerable by reason of its persistence and by the absence of any prospect of a new dawn. The flower of Tamil youth killed off in thousands, their homesteads and households broken up, their families dispersed all over the globe, their temples desecrated, essential components of a cohesive social order dismantled, deprived of the most basic necessities for civilised living and the community as a whole reduced almost to the stone age (mind you, all this inflicted on them as much by enemy within as by the enemy without) today, the people of Jaffna stand in need of the "light that shineth" more than ever in their long history. Considering that they make this awesome claim to be the custodians of the Light that the darkness cannot overcome, it is fitting and proper than in the year that marks the 175 anniversary of their birth, St John's College Jaffna and its alumni both in Jaffna and elsewhere should reflect seriously on what their responsibilities are in relation to the encircling gloom. Its not sufficient that Johnians merely preen themselves upon reaching the impressive landmark of their 175th anniversary. They must also confront the tragic reality that towers over them and ask whether, hidden deep within the motto of their alma mater, there isn't an answer and a way out. St John's College Jaffna celebrated its 175th anniversary in May this year making it perhaps the oldest secondary school in Sri Lanka. Several articles have already appeared in newspapers as well as in a few magazines recording its' many achievements in the academic field as well as in the sports arena, rendering any attempt by me to traverse the same ground superfluous and boring. What I would like to do is to reflect on two aspects of the education imparted by St John's and also consider the relevance of its motto to the tragedy which St John's and indeed the whole of the Sri Lankan Tamil community find themselves in today. The Old Park I would like to start on a personal note by recalling the many happy years I spent in Jaffna in the mid sixties as an administrator, when I was a neighbour to St John's College. I am much indebted to the many young students of St John's of that time, many of whom are today eminent professionals for teaching me what it means to be "good neighbour". The Old Park, as the Residency's vast grounds were then called, used to be a grove to luxuriant mango trees whose branches, during the season, would be festooned with the most succulent mangoes one could ever hope to taste. Upon the ringing of the evening college bell scores of little Johnians would vault over my garden wall and swarm all over the mango trees despoiling me of my treasured fruits. I must confess that I was not always amused, indeed often chagrined, but at least I learnt at the hands of the boys of St John's, the substance of patience, the virtue of sharing (albeit compulsorily) and good neighbourliness. I am very much in their debt. One of the many other recollections I have of St John's was reading the references to the college in the diaries of two of my great predecessors as Government Agents of Jaffna, Sir Percival Acland Dyke (Govt. Agent Jaffna for forty years during the early and mid nineteenth century and referred to by locals as "The Rajah of the North") and of Sir William Twynham who succeeded him (Govt Agent for thirty seven years). Contrary to popular belief, the missionary enterprise in Jaffna, pre-eminently represented by St John's, did not find favour with Govt Agent Dyke. An epitome of the colonial pro-consul, authoritarian, haughty and distant, Dyke considered the missionaries as a threat to his own power base and even viewed their efforts to spread literacy and break down caste barriers among the Tamil people as an unnecessary meddling in the affairs of governance. He was no great believer, was unwilling to yield to a divinity higher than himself, and was not particularly attracted by the zeal of the missionaries to roll back the frontiers of "darkness". In fact he considered institutions like St John's somewhat of a nuisance and many were the instances when he refused even to see the presiding principal. On the other hand Sir William Twynham who succeeded him was himself more missionary than a stereotype civil servant and was always available to the missionaries and to the Principal of St John's for little favours. Unlike Dyke who refused to accept recommendations from the Principal of St John's on behalf of candidates applying for vacancies in the Kachcheri, Twynham readily acceded. I believe that St John's owes a great deal to the patronage it received from Twynham. I seem to recall that the remains of Twynham's sister who lived on in Jaffna until she passed away in 1911, lie buried somewhere in St John's Church graveyard. Cultural Roots The first aspect of education imparted at St John's, which I would like to draw attention (indeed it was a characteristic of the education imparted in all missionary schools in Jaffna) was the way it contrasted sharply with the education imparted by similar schools in the Sinhala south, in respect of the impacts they made on local culture. Unlike in the south, the mission schools in the north never succeeded completely in weaning the locals from their cultural roots. World-wide, one of the most potent instruments of cultural domination has been missionary education. Admittedly while mission schools imparted literacy in one or other of the world languages and opened the minds of the local people to a

knowledge base they would otherwise not have had access to, they also invariably undermined the local culture and even made the locals despise their historical and cultural inheritance. This was clearly evident among the Sinhala people who came under the influence of missionary education in the south. Indeed this influence was so pervasive that it spilled over even into the whole of the Sinhala culture touching even those who had never been to mission schools. By contrast, under the same influence Tamil culture survived and thrived. Distributing my working time as a public servant, among the Sinhala as well as among the Tamil people almost in equal proportion, I found this phenomenon quite perplexing. I had my own secondary education in two of Sri Lanka's foremost mission schools in the south, one a High Anglican and the other a Roman Catholic. In both places, more so in the former the urge to speak one's mother tongue and the instinct to live within one's culture were consciously ridiculed and discouraged. Unless the ensuing distortion was corrected at home or at the local temple, an opportunity vouchsafed only to the children from Buddhist and Hindu homes, the majority of those from so called "Christian" homes grew up believing that they were the vehicles of a superior western culture. In actual fact, they were purveyors of a pseudo culture, straw men, hollow men, belonging neither to this culture nor the other. The question that demands an explanation is this. Why did this not happen among the Tamils of Jaffna? I say Tamils of "Jaffna" advisedly because the Tamils who settled down in Colombo and severed their links with Jaffna, lost their cultural genitalia as rapidly as did the Sinhalayo who came under missionary influence in the south. The missionary enterprise concentrated much more in Jaffna than in the south. It deployed more mission schools per head of the Tamil population, more missionary personnel, and more funds. It raised English literacy levels per capita above the levels in the south and certainly bequeathed to the Tamil people a stronger base for technological and scientific achievement. Actually, these intrusions should have served to erode the Tamils' culture base more extensively than into the Sinhala south and yet it did not happen. To the contrary, the missionary enterprise in Jaffna seems to have strengthened the Tamils' sense of cultural identity and even today at the fore front of the Tamils' struggle, both at home and abroad, march the missionaries. If the erosion of Sinhala culture has to be blamed primarily on the mission schools and if as is often claimed were the villain, we need to explain why the same process did not work in Jaffna where the missionary enterprise was certainly more pervasive. Is it possible the Tamil culture has a factor built into it that rendered it more resilient? Is it Hinduism which down the centuries in India enabled the local tradition to integrate diverse foreign elements into itself without at the same time causing it to lose its' essential identity? Has Theravada Buddhism's openness and fundamentally empirical world view, despite the underpinning it has always provided to Sinhala culture, also made Sinhala culture more susceptible to erosion...? This is a paradox which I can only pose but must leave to the more knowledgeable to answer. The other aspect of the education imparted at St John's to which I would like to draw attention is the strong value system upon which it rests. Schools like St John's embodied a specific world-view, within which education was seen as being more than an exercise for imparting information and knowledge. This concept of education holds that the development of character and the integration of the students personality around strongly held core values is more important than merely acquiring information and knowledge or passing exams. Values such as wholeness, unfoldment of the total personality, discipline, integrity, loyalty, respect for the rights of others, respect for authority and not least, excellence in whatever task one undertakes, were placed on the same level as acquiring information and knowledge. Consequently, students of St John's College indeed whoever went through schools that subscribed to a similar value system, generally distinguished themselves in public life as men and women of integrity and character. St John's in that sense a centre of excellence, in the best classical sense of the term I should know, because during my time in the public service I had the opportunity to work with several products of St John's and without exception they all distinguished themselves as models of efficiency, discipline and impeccable probity. Contrary to the view that schools like St John's should be banished from the field of education, a view which was not only common in our country in the sixties but was embodied as government policy and systematically carried out, I believe that they have even a greater role to play today than ever in our history. Throughout our land, within Jaffna as well as elsewhere, we see today a steady retreat from excellence, the enthronement of mediocrity and the abandonment of those values which schools like St John's strove to inculcate in their students. Integrity has yielded to opportunism and the commitment to principles abandoned in favour of naked cynicism. Values that we learn in school to comprise the fabric of a civilised society have all but evaporated leaving behind a vast moral vacuum. Standards among those holding public office, whether in politics or in the public services or in the professions, which by the criteria we imbibed in our schools are so degrading as to be even unthinkable, now tend to be condoned as the norm. Except occasionally for a blast from an embattled media , the voices of many of our intellectuals and our religious leaders, to whom more than to any other group should belong the obligation to sound the trumpet of protest, have fallen silent. To the contrary, some of them seem even to have jumped the bandwagon of opportunism and collaboration. Even worse, the intrepid few among them who dig in and refusing to be swept away but strive valiantly to live by their high values, are pushed to the periphery and are relegated to the status of dinosaurs. Such is the abyss from which we now have to climb out. Moral Energy It is in this context that St John's of Jaffna must recover the faith and the moral energy to persist in its commitment to those values: which will always define what is good and noble in the human condition and which regardless of the clamour of the barbarians at the gate, are worth preserving for all time. The task to put it mildly, is Herculean, not least because of the destruction and desolation which surrounds the College

on all sides. However those who subscribe to the values which St John's embodies can take heart, for history teaches us that societies and cultures which were at one time reduced to a wasteland, went back to their spiritual roots and found therein the nourishment to re-integrate and launch out on a new life. This however does not happen spontaneously. It calls for leaders, for men and women imbued with a high vision and a nobility of spirit. It is not sufficient merely to be intelligent or educated. It also requires leaders who yet retain a gleam in their eyes and within whose trembling hearts, despite the enveloping darkness, a candle still burns. It requires "resurrection power", an extraordinary experience vouchsafed to all who have opened themselves to the high vision and are prepared to venture out in faith. Let St John's contemplate again its' awesome motto - "Lux in Tenebris Lucet" - the light shineth in darkness. As they well know these words are taken from St John's Gospel and the "Light" referred to is Jesus Christ. The line that follows is really the bedrock of hope for it says "but the darkness shall not overcome it". To return to its spiritual roots means pre-eminently to grasp again the vision of perfection and the awesome power embodied in that "Light". Let the Johnians of today therefore recapture again that image of perfection and give expression to it in an idiom that is consonant with their own cultural inheritance. May I close by quoting some words of encouragement with reference to that "Light", from the same source where St John's College discovered its motto.

Behold my servant whom I uphold,I have put my spirit upon him; He will bring forth justice to the nations,He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for His law.He will lead the blind by a way they know not of, in paths they know not of He will guide them. He will turn their darkness into light, Yes, the rough places into level ground. These are the things He will do and He will never forsake them. (Isiah 42)