

Covid Season (15.11.20)
Two before Advent

Zephaniah 1.7, 12–end
1 Thessalonians 5.1–11
Matthew 25.14–30

THE DARKNESS OF GOD

Two lines from Eliot's poem *East Coker* come back to me from time to time:

'I said to my soul, be still, and let
the dark come upon you
which shall be the darkness of God.'

Darkness is a very powerful image, and for many people these are dark times, and just as we catch a glimpse of light, the clouds gather over us again. Darkness conjures up pictures of fear and destruction, the work of our lower nature. Much of contemporary art reflects this darkness, warning us of the abyss before it's too late.

Some years ago *The Independent* reviewed a collection of photographs on the theme of darkness by the war photographer Don McCullin. He portrayed his native Somerset, not in the beautiful colours of the pictorial calendars, but in sharply contrasted black and white; heavy skies, deserted fields, bleak winter sea shores and overgrown tracks. They were pictures of humanity at war with the environment, the most terrible and senseless war in which mankind is involved. This image of darkness is of the darkness of Man. It is this darkness that leads to the judgement of which both Zephaniah and Jesus warn in dramatic terms. And we live in such times. As I've said before, it is as though God is holding a mirror in which we can see the darkness that we have created.

If this is the darkness of Man, what then is the darkness of which Eliot speaks, the darkness of God? As I thought about this, the opening verses of *Genesis* came into my mind: 'In the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.' This was a different darkness; it was full of the potential of new life. It was into this darkness that God spoke and brought forth all that he created. This darkness is full of hope, not despair; this is the darkness of God. It seemed to me that it was in this darkness that God did his deepest, most mysterious work, the work of creation.

My mind then moved to the Cross, another time when darkness was over the face of the earth. One view of the Cross is of the evil that led to it: the rejection of the Son of Man, the mockery of his trial, the weakness of Pilate, the viciousness of the Sanhedrin and of the crowd baying for blood. And this is a true view. It shows the same darkness as Don McCullin's photographs, of Man defeated by his own pride and selfishness.

But another view has to be held alongside it, because in that darkness God was again at work, overcoming evil with good, the work of redemption. This indeed is the truer view. What looked at first like the darkness of despair was in fact the darkness of hope. In those three hours of darkness we encounter God in his most unfathomable, most unknowable aspect; it was the time when he wrought the salvation of mankind, his deepest, most mysterious work. The life of faith is about appropriating this divine gift, as St Paul assured the Christians of Thessalonica.

It seemed to me as I reflected further on these two aspects of darkness that much of our experience has this dual aspect. Everyone

knows dark times, and the temptation is to regard them simply as negative. Sometimes this may be the right attitude, but more often than not, I feel, if we are prepared, in Eliot's words, to let the darkness come upon us rather than resist it, we shall find that it has another aspect: we shall find God at work in it.

There are countless examples of people finding this to be so, whether the darkness be acute physical suffering, mental anguish, depression, remorse following wrong-doing, or grief – perhaps the most common experience of darkness. God seems absent. Prayer, too, can feel the same. Often we feel nothing, no insights come to us; we ask: 'Is anyone is listening?' On the Cross Jesus had the same experience of the absence of God as he cried out, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' If this is how we feel, Julian of Norwich offers hope. In the midst of a time of personal darkness when she was seriously ill, she had a series of visions. In one Jesus encouraged her to pray even if she did not enjoy it. He said: 'It does you good, though you feel nothing, see nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to me though you find little enough to enjoy in it. This is true of all believing prayer.' (*Revelations of Divine Love, ch. 41*)

It requires faith and courage to be still and let the darkness come upon us. We may, like Jesus on the cross, experience the absence of God rather than his presence, but whatever we feel he will be at work as he was with Jesus, and we can be sure he is at work now. God can transfigure the darkness of Man so that it becomes the darkness of God, the source of hope and new life.