

Advent 2020
DARKNESS TO LIGHT

- I-

Mark 13.24–end

Stables are dark, messy places. Smelly too. Yet it was in a stable that Jesus was born, in the dark, amongst the smells and the mess. More than likely the stable was a cave where the animals were kept – the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over just such a cave. Not quite the same as the nice, clean, airy stables that you get in a nativity set.

Darkness conjures up pictures of fear and despair, pain and destruction – not unlike the picture in today’s gospel reading. Darkness has touched us all this year. In the Covid pandemic we’re living through a time of darkness and just as we catch a glimpse of light, the clouds gather over us again.

Where is God in this darkness?

Two weeks ago I reflected on this, and quoted these lines from T S Eliot’s poem *East Coker*:

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

What is the darkness of God?

It is a disturbing image, bringing to mind the violent passages in the Bible about a wrathful God, punishing those who do not obey his laws. And there is a strong element in the NT – as in today’s reading

- about a coming time of judgement, a time of which we do not know the day or the hour. And we're warned: 'Beware, keep alert!'

It is most unlikely that Jesus actually spoke these words - they show all the marks of a later tradition, like the Book of Revelation - and they don't fit with his picture of a God of love, but that doesn't mean that we can ignore them. Essentially, they are a warning that at some time we shall stand before God as our judge, something that Jesus was very clear about. I think we have to see times of darkness, like the Covid pandemic, in the same way: they are also times of judgement. It is as though God is holding a mirror in which we can see the darkness that we have created - the darkness of Man.

This is one aspect of the darkness of God, but there is another, more hopeful image that has to be held alongside it. We see this hopeful image particularly in two times of darkness described in the Bible.

The first is in Genesis: 'In the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.' This darkness was not a time of fear, suffering and judgement; it was quite different. This darkness was full of the potential of new life. It was into this darkness that God spoke and brought forth light and life. This darkness is full of hope, not despair. It was out of this darkness that the creation was born.

The other time when darkness was over the face of the earth was at the Crucifixion. The darkness of Man nailed Jesus to the Cross, but in that darkness God was again at work, overcoming evil with good. To Mary and the disciples it must have felt like the darkness of despair, the end of hope, but in God's hands it was the darkness of hope. In

those three hours of darkness God wrought the salvation of the world, his deepest, most mysterious work.

Everyone knows dark times, and we want them to pass. 'Where are you, God?' we cry. 'Let these clouds pass. Let me see the sun!' But the way to the light is more likely to be through the darkness, than in trying to chase it away. If, as Eliot said, we 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 many examples of this. In the darkness of the pandemic God is at work in those who work to discover the secrets of the virus, the way it spreads, and to create an effective vaccine. God is at work too in the countless acts of support and love that people have given especially to the elderly and vulnerable, in care homes, hospitals and in homes and the community. And there are many who have found meaning in suffering and grief, often through these acts of kindness and compassion.

Even in times of judgement God's light breaks through. But, even so, it requires faith and courage to be still and let the darkness come upon us. Mary did that. In her day, being unmarried and having a child was a source of disgrace. But God was at work. In the darkness of the stable Mary gave birth to the Son of God, the source of hope and new life. In the darkness there was light.

- II -

Malachi 3.1-2a + 5 / Mark 1.1-8

I remember the first time I saw *Godspell*, the Gospel musical. It opens with the ringing call of John the Baptist: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him.' The words come from Isaiah, who speaks of a voice crying in the wilderness, and it was in the wilderness of Judea that John appeared, a dry, arid, rocky desert where it's hard to know where you are and to find your way. It has its own darkness, the darkness of confusion, fear and despair - a darkness that the world experiences today. In this darkness John calls us straighten out our lives and build a new way to God, and he points to Jesus, the true and living way.

We think of Jesus as Lord of our life, but he is not just a personal saviour, he is also Lord of all the World. In Orthodox churches this is symbolised by a mosaic or painting of Christ Pantocrator (that is 'Lord of all the world') high up in the central dome. Those who worship do so under the stern gaze of him who will come to judge the quick and the dead. In this Covid pandemic we're living through a time of judgement - not in the sense that God has sent the plague as a punishment for our sins, but in the sense that he's holding up a mirror in which we can catch a glimpse of how things are and of how they ought to be. Now is a time to clear a straight path for God.

Jesus taught us to pray that God's will be done and his kingdom come on earth as in heaven. This larger hope is reflected in three of the Advent Antiphons: Jesus is praised as the King of the Nations, as

the Giver of the Law, and as God's Sign to the nations. This third antiphon ends with the prayer that he will 'Come, and set us free.'

The Covid pandemic has made us think a lot about freedom as our liberties are restricted by the lock-down rules. We want to be free of restrictions on our lives, and it's right to want that, but I think we need to go a bit deeper because a basic part of straightening the path of life is about how we use our freedom.

The Christian understanding of freedom is rooted in the story of the Exodus. When the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, being freed from oppression would have been their main concern. That was also God's concern, but his concern went deeper. When Moses confronted Pharaoh it was with the demand that the slaves be set free so that they could worship God. In God's eyes freedom is never simply freedom from oppression, it also freedom for worship. Worship is about the way we live the whole of our lives, about everything we do. What we do in the market place is just as much part of our worship as what we do the in holy place.

Freedom has a purpose beyond individual liberty. God gave us freedom not just to do our own thing but to contribute to the common good. This is a consistent theme of the prophets – the reading from Malachi is a good example. He condemns sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers: they abuse the freedom that God has given them, but he also condemns 'those who cheat the workers of their wages, wrong the widow and fatherless, who thrust the alien aside, and do not fear me.' They also abuse their freedom. Acting with justice and integrity in business and in society is just as much God's concern as doing the right thing in our personal lives.

The straight path that John calls us to build brings the two together, and to do that we have to submit our freedom to God. Jesus spoke about this when he described himself as the True Vine: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Anyone who dwells in me ... bears much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.' (*John 15.5*) To be fruitful we have to be rooted in him.

To be truly free you have to be rooted. Freedom that is not rooted in God degenerates into licence and anarchy – the agents of darkness.

Darkness is part of the Christmas story. Jesus was born in a stable, not in a palace, or a castle, or a grand house; Jesus was born in poverty, and a telling sign of how we use our freedom is how we treat the poor. The Bible is clear that the poor are God's special concern. We live in a world marred by a huge and growing gap between the poor and the rich, a gap that the pandemic has brought home to us: the greater incidence of the infection in the poorer areas of the country is plain for all to see – this is one of the things we see reflected in the mirror that God holds before us. In this darkness God is at work enabling us to see that this pandemic has brought us to a turning point. God asks us how will we use our freedom.

We believe Jesus is God's sign to the nations, and the Christian hope is that rooted in him we will use our freedom to build a just and caring society, dispelling the darkness and letting in the light.

- III -

Isaiah 60.1-3, 6b / John 1.4-9; 8.12

When life is completely disrupted, as in this pandemic, we find ourselves asking: Where we are going? What journey are we on?

There are three journeys in the story of Jesus' birth: Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, the Magi travelling from the East, and the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt. Of the three, the journey of the Magi is the most mysterious. It was foretold by Isaiah: 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.' The Magi were probably Persian holy men, rather than kings; Zoroastrian priests who studied the heavens in search of truth. They saw the appearance of a new star as the sign of the coming of a new king, and they followed the star to the place of his birth. For them it was a journey from darkness to light, and it was an experience that changed them, for they went home another way.

Where we are going? What star are we following? - the star that we follow shapes our lives. The fifth Advent Antiphon praises Jesus as the Bright Star of Dawn, and prays that he will come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness.

Dawn is a time of awakening, a time of hope, when the shadows of the night are dispersed, and the soft light of dawn suffuses our lives. One dawn that I will not forget was on the summit of Mt Sinai. The dawn light has a special quality; it is soft, more varied and subtle, less blinding. It illuminated the mountains in a way that the harsh light of day does not. At the dawn you see differently, and in the

same way the light of Christ enables us to see differently, offering a new view of God and new view of ourselves. Perhaps, like the Magi, our journey changes, and we take another way.

Jesus is the sign of God's new dawn. As St John says, he brought light and life to the world: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' (*John 1.4*) Later, when Jesus was teaching in the Temple early one morning, he described himself as the Light of the World: 'No one,' he said, 'who follows me shall dwell in darkness, he shall have the light of life.' (*John 8.12*) For Christians, to be enlightened is to live by the light of Christ; the Bright Star of Dawn is the star that we follow.

This is not how the world sees it. These days to be enlightened is to live by the values of The Enlightenment of the C18th. It enthroned Reason, not Faith, as the light that guides our journey, placing the individual at centre of life instead of God. It was hailed as a new dawn, but in truth it was a false dawn. It did bring benefits, the most important being modern science, but its downside is seen in the uncaring individualism and the loss of community that characterises modern life. It gave rise to the consumer society, where, in Oscar Wilde's words, we know the price of everything but the value of nothing. It has led, too, to the widespread sense of alienation that has brought about the rise of militant groups like *ISIS*, and acts of terror like that at the Manchester Arena.

The Enlightenment taught us to follow our own star, to live by our own lights. But if we really want to move from darkness to light, then we need to follow the light of Christ, or, to put it another way, we need to follow the path of virtue. One of the psalms describes

virtue as 'the fountain of life' (*Psalms 36.9*). Jesus used the same image in his encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the well. He promised her 'living water' which, he said, would become within her 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' (*John 4.14*) Virtue is the light of Christ within us, a fountain of grace that guides our journey.

We hear more about values than virtue today, but they are not the same. Virtue is prior to values; it is what shapes our values and enables us to live a life that is morally good. The pursuit of virtue gives us the inner strength to live by higher values, qualities and standards (particularly those that are altruistic), than the values that simply serve our self-interest. We think of values as personally chosen, part of our life style. Virtue, by contrast, is something given, and it is not concerned so much with life style as with life-giving style.

Growing in virtue is about growing in qualities like prudence, love, courage, integrity and humility. Humility is the foundation on which a virtuous life is built. It's not about doing ourselves down; it's the doorway to our true self, an inner strength that comes from a true appreciation of our place before God and within the community; a strength that means that you do not have to have your own way all the time. Humility helps us to achieve an inner freedom that frees us from selfish desires and allows us to be shaped by other people's lives.

What star are we following? The star that the Magi followed led them to Jesus, and they humbled themselves before him, offering gifts. Wisdom knelt, and paid homage to truth. Christmas invites us to do the same and find true enlightenment, moving from darkness to light, seeing things differently, and returning home another way.

- IV -

Revelation 21.1-4, 22-24 / Matthew 1.18-25

One of the things we have all found really hard during the pandemic is being apart from family and friends. Life's not the same when you can't be *with* those we love. And it has been especially hard when someone has died. Not being able to say 'Goodbye' leaves us feeling regretful and empty. It's not surprising that we feel like this because close relationships are basic to life, and when they are denied we feel not only a sense of loss, but of incompleteness - something essential to our humanity is missing. Loneliness and isolation can be deep experiences of darkness, driving many to despair, and, as we know, there is widespread concern about mental health in this pandemic.

Faith, I think, helps to bring some light into the darkness: whatever comes our way, God is with us. The last of the seven Advent Antiphons - the praises of Jesus sung in the week before Christmas - celebrates him as Emmanuel, God-with-us. The prophecy of Isaiah, to which Matthew refers, has been fulfilled. Most obviously, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy by coming among us and sharing our humanity. He is the living sign that God is with his people, both in salvation and in judgement. But Jesus also fulfils the prophecy at a deeper level: he was the sign in time, that God is eternally with us in the moral sense of taking our part, bearing our burdens, supporting and caring for us, and also rebuking us and calling us back when we go astray. Being *with* someone in this way is to love them; we all need this depth of love if we are to grow and flourish in our humanity.

Caring and compassionate love is the most basic of our needs. We can face pain, suffering, hardship, persecution even, if we do not have to do it alone. Love brings light.

At Christmas we hail the coming of the life that is light; we rejoice that God is *with* us, a truth beautifully expressed in a prayer by Bishop Richard Harries:

O God, Father,
moment by moment you hold me in being,
on you I depend.
O God, Eternal Son,
friend and brother beside me,
in you I trust.
O God, Holy Spirit,
life and love within me,
from you I live.

The Christian hope that light will dispel the darkness is one with the belief that God *is* love, and that Jesus is indeed the ‘friend and brother beside us’, the one who stands with us, come what may. Our hope is rooted in the belief that in Jesus God’s very being is revealed. When Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ he summed up the being of God: God is Life, the ground of our being, our creator and the source of our life and our flourishing; God is Resurrection, the source of new life, hope, justice and reconciliation. The sign of this is the resurrection of Jesus himself. His resurrection did not annul his passion; rather God absorbed it into himself showing that his own life of love is stronger than the sins of men, opening a new way forward. Bishop Simon Phipps once said to me, ‘In the resurrection God says to you, “You can trust me with your life.”’

Life and Resurrection are the gifts of love; they cannot exist without love; they proceed from love and they enfold us in love. Julian of Norwich speaks beautifully of that enfolding. She says: 'Our soul is God's creation: it sees God, it gazes on God, and it loves God. And God rejoices in his creature, and his creature in God, eternally marvelling. In this we know that we have been made for love, and in this love God everlastingly keeps us.' And again, in a delightfully personal way, she says: 'Our lover desires that our soul should cling to him with all its might, and that we should ever hold fast to his goodness. ... He who made us for love, will by that same love restore us to our former blessedness – and yet more.'

'And yet more.' The 'more' that God offers us is to walk in his light, a light that the darkness shall never overcome, a light that reveals to us our true selves. As someone said to me of his turning to Christ, 'I became a new version of me.'

The times may be dark, but the light of Christ never fades, God never ceases to be with us. The Bible opens with the creation of light, and ends with a vision of the holy city, coming down out of heaven, whose light is the glory of God. It begins also with a lovely picture of God being with us as Adam is formed from the dust of the earth and God breathes into him the breath of life. God is close, intimate, the source of life and love, and what he has made he will not let go. We see that at the end of the story: in the heavenly city God has his dwelling with us; he will wipe the tears from our eyes, and suffering and death will be no more. God is with his people, and he making all things new. The world and its peoples have passed from darkness to light. God *is* with us. Alleluia!