

## **Reflection for Christmas by Rev Steve Painting**

Luke 2:1-20 & John 1:1-14

Each year, over the Advent and Christmas period it pleases me to look out to the Church here at Heanton and see the star shining from the top of the tower. It is a visual reminder that Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness. This year I have found that reminder particularly helpful, for it does feel like we are in the midst of a particularly dark period of uncertainty. We continue to live under the shadow of the covid pandemic and its ramifications on our health and social care system and economy. Our political landscape feels rather wobbly and we cannot help but be affected by the plight of refugees, close to home and across the world. Perhaps our greatest threat is from climate change which is already at a critical level and affecting the lives of many. I could go on describing the features of our dark world but that would serve only to shift the focus away from the crucial message of Christmas; the light of God has entered into and continues to shine in the darkness.

Darkness is not a new thing. The world was dark when Jesus came. In our reading from the first chapter of his gospel, John uses the terms 'darkness' and 'the world' as metaphors for a prevailing order that is opposed to the ways of God. What he wants his readers to know though is that the story he is about to tell, is one of how God has acted to lighten the darkness and bring transformation.

If John, through his metaphors, tells us what has happened, our reading from Luke's Gospel describes how it happened through the real life story of the birth of Jesus. Like John, Luke doesn't deny the darkness of the world into which Jesus is born. His first statements concerning the calling of the census reveal a political regime that is more concerned with the protection of power rather than the well-

being of its people. Mary and Joseph had no choice but to make the long and hazardous journey, possibly with the help of a donkey, but more likely taking the three to four day trek on foot. They suffered the harshness of this dark world, yet even if they could not see it immediately, they would in time, realise that God was at work in the midst of their hardship. The events they were part of were the outworking of the statement of John, 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it' (verse 5). The footnote in my Bible reveals that the word 'overcome' could also be translated as the word, 'understood'. I like the confusion, for to me, both words are relevant. If we take it to read, 'understood' then we can surmise that the wisdom of the world does not get the wisdom of God. To the world, the ways of God are risky or even foolish for they appear to lack security. The vulnerability required to abide by the values of God's kingdom are not acceptable or logical to a dark world focussed on self-protection.

If on the otherhand we take the translation to read 'overcome' then we recognise that the darkness will never engulf the light. When I imagine what the light of Jesus is like, I do not think of the white light of a torch beam. I think of the light of Jesus as a candlelight, but one of those trick candles that you sometimes find on birthday cakes. No matter how much or how hard you blow on these candles, they always come back to life. The flame of such a candle still gives a warm and rather vulnerable light, but just when it goes out and you think it is defeated, its light returns. That is how things are with God's kingdom. Just when the kingdom of darkness seems to have won over, God's kingdom shows up even more clearly.

Luke's account of the shepherd's visit to Mary illustrates this point particularly well. It is an unexpected element of the story that shepherds should see the angels and be the first to acknowledge the

new-born Christ and spread the good news. Religious outcasts, (although paradoxically, they were probably responsible for the very animals that served as sacrificial offerings) the shepherds knew spiritual darkness, but in the physical darkness of night, the angels appear to them and tell of the good news. At the same time, Mary is experiencing a dark and uncertain situation of her own, having a baby in circumstances that are considerably less than ideal. She was far from home and although Joseph was with her, the female members of her family that would have normally attended the birth, and one assumes, would have been more sympathetic to her condition, were not at hand. Furthermore, an animal pen is hardly the most desirable place to have a baby. Mary would in all likelihood, have been scared and anxious, and the arrival of a few rustic looking shepherds was probably little consolation. The things they had to tell her however, resonated with the words given to her by the angel Gabriel. We are told that she treasured those words in her heart. Light breaks in once more and faith is built not only for Mary and Joseph but for the shepherds who 'returned glorifying God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told' (verse 20).

The important point to remember here though, is that faith is built on faith. Mary could have refused to believe or take on the message of the angel Gabriel but instead, acknowledged 'I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled' (Luke 1:38). The shepherds could have stayed put in the fields with the sheep and never been fully sure that the angels they had seen were real. Both Mary and the shepherds acted in faith and in doing so, God arranged the circumstances through which their faith was increased. In this I am reminded of more words from our reading from John's gospel. "He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he

gave the right to become children of God' (verses 11-12). It strikes me that the shepherds, regarded by the religious elite as spiritual nobodies, were the first to become children of God.

In our times, we should not be surprised by the darkness of the world around us. Later in John's gospel we find Jesus praying for protection of his followers who he acknowledges, belong to a different kingdom (God's kingdom) yet still find themselves immersed in a world that remains under the influence of dark forces. If we look for it though, we will also see the flicker of the light of Jesus. Whatever Christmas brings this year and however dark we might think things are, we must hold on to the certain hope of Christmas, that the light of God, though not understood by the prevailing world order, will not be overcome by the darkness we see around us. Jesus in his earthly ministry presented signs of what the light of God's kingdom is like. Demons driven out, healing of disease, poverty and injustice challenged, and lives transformed. The climax of the story is of course, Easter when the darkness of death is defeated but there would be no Easter without Christmas. The light that made Easter possible, came into the world in the life of the child born to Mary.

My prayer this Christmas, is that in spite of any darkness that we fear will overwhelm us, God will show us something of his light, and that we will respond to that light with the faith seen in the lives of the shepherds and Mary.

So I wish you all a very peaceful and happy Christmas.