

“Darkness came over the whole land...”

It is the end of British Summer Time. The consolation of an extra hour in bed seems small compared to the prospect of dark evenings and a winter of great uncertainty as Covid escalates and lockdowns threaten. The questions reverberate - will we stay healthy? will Launde manage to stay open? will the country hold together? When Jesus was crucified, darkness came over the whole land, and the natural world seemed to participate in the sombre reality of all that was happening at Golgotha. I don't think I am alone in feeling this year that the onset of autumn with its lengthening darkness has likewise felt to be mirroring the mood of the country with all the potential for resumed restrictions, social isolation and economic uncertainty. Darkness without has touched darkness within – anxiety, sadness, loss.

There has been a lot of talk about Christmas. Originally it was the PM's promise that it would be all over by Christmas. More recently it has been about students and whether they would be able to return home at Christmas - will families be able to get together at Christmas? carols be sung to celebrate Christmas and so on? Initially I couldn't understand why we were getting so preoccupied with something which at the time was over three months off. But then I realised how much Christmas keeps us going at this time of the year. It is the boost for many businesses. But more importantly it is the promise of light at the heart of darkness, a beacon of warmth in the winter chill. The prospect of no Christmas makes winter seem endless and overwhelming. Not for nothing did CS Lewis portray the bleakness of the white witch's Narnia as “Always winter but never Christmas”. As a poem I was sent back in March expressed it

“Spring is in the air
But it feels like winter
An eerie quiet winter
A frightening Narnian winter
With no Christmas to brighten the days
But a stopping, waiting,
Worrying questioning winter:
When will this end?
Will the world be the same after?
Who will I be when it is over?”

The darkness affects us all, and you don't have to be a victim of Seasonal Affective Disorder to feel its melancholy power. But is that all we can say about the darkness? Have we just got to hang in there until the new year, and hope that lengthening days will also bring a lightening mood?

One of the blessings of living here at Launde Abbey is the night sky. Having lived in towns in recent years, I had forgotten the awesome experience of a star-filled sky undimmed by the light pollution of an urban environment. There are certain things that we can only see in the dark. If that is true of the physical universe around us it is also true spiritually. Darkness has its place in our spiritual journey and is part of how we see and know God.

We get plenty of clues of that in the scriptures. At the giving of the ten commandments when the presence of God at Mount Sinai was accompanied by thunder and lightning, cloud and smoke, the people are afraid and we are told that “they remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was”. Whatever we understand was happening there, the implication is that God was to be encountered in the darkness, in the place of mystery and human vulnerability. In fact as the Psalmist reminds us the distinction between light and darkness is a human perspective rather than a divine reality - “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.’” God inhabits all reality – there are no no-go areas, no-where we can hide from God, or where he cannot be present to us. In human life that is most profoundly depicted at Calvary as darkness descends and Jesus cries out “My God, My God why have you forsaken me”. What an extraordinary paradox that God in Christ is to be found in the place of God abandonment.

We must be careful not to romanticise darkness. To say that God can be found there is not to say that it might not be uncomfortable, frightening or even overwhelming and certainly not somewhere we naively seek out. However Isaiah speaks of “the treasures of darkness” and the mystics testify to that time on the spiritual journey when darkness characterises our experience more than light, absence more than presence, faith more than sight. John of the Cross is most well known for his articulation of the experience of darkness. Writing out of his experience of solitary confinement in prison, his poem ‘The Dark night’ captures the transforming presence of God that came to him in his dark cell. As such he can exclaim “O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn! O night that has united the Lover with his beloved, transforming the beloved in her Lover.” Later in the Ascent of Mount Carmel he expands on his idea of the dark night

“We can offer three reasons for calling this journey towards union with God a night. The first has to do with the point of departure, because individuals must deprive themselves of their appetites for worldly possessions. This denial and privation is like a night for all one’s senses. The second reason refers to the means or the road along which a person travels to this union. Now this road is faith, and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night. The third reason pertains to the point of arrival, namely God. And God is also a dark night to the soul in this life.”

The first time I read those words, in spite of them sounding somewhat austere and challenging I found my spirit strangely moved and lightened. At last someone was daring to

say it as it is, to articulate the cost of faith, the challenge of letting go of control, trusting in God himself rather than the experiences or gifts he gives, leaving behind the distractions and superficial consolations, acknowledging the awesome mystery of the God we are seeking. Yes this feels like darkness sometimes yet as when we have the courage to walk out at night, we can discover the stars, the things that we can only see in the dark.

Part of our foreboding at the approach of winter this year is the not knowing quite what lies ahead. Will the NHS be overwhelmed by the avalanche of this pandemic? Will the economic turmoil caused by continuing lockdowns spread untold hardship and deprivation? Will we have the political leadership to maintain social cohesion and stability? Will we all have the mental resilience to survive the trials of these days? And for us people of faith will the church have the depth to enter the darkness and discover within it the presence of God? That I think is the great challenge for this time that we come to a new place of faith – where we know that the future is out of our control, where we have to trust God at a depth we have not been to before. So that when darkness comes over the whole land, we have the strength to stay with it without fear, until the resurrection dawn breaks.

Lighten our darkness Lord we pray; and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night. For the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ Amen.