

## Christmas Eve

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

### **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

Tuesday this past week was the shortest day of the year. The winter solstice. The days began to lengthen from Wednesday onwards. The change is almost imperceptible at first, but come the end of January / early February we will begin to notice it.

We can appreciate why, in pre Christian times, the winter solstice was a time of great celebration and feasting. A celebration that the sun had reversed the progress of darkness. Light had overcome the darkness. That there would be spring and then summer again.

There is a strong tradition that in early Christian years the alignment of December 25th with the celebration of the birth of Christ was to pick up on this theme of light defeating darkness, as well as the desire to Christianise an existing pagan festival.

There is certainly little historical evidence to say that Jesus was in fact born in December. I read an article this week that argued persuasively that because of what we know from scripture and Jewish tradition, based mostly on when John the Baptist's father Zechariah might have been serving in the temple (which is when the birth of John was first foretold), we can calculate that Jesus was probably born towards the end of September.

I guess that in the great way of things it doesn't matter that much.

But this evening I would like to pick up on this theme of light defeating darkness. We read in the great prologue to John's gospel - **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

And darkness is of course not just to do with the amount of daylight. It is not just to do with the winter solstice.

This year has, in many ways, been a very dark year.

The terrible scenes in Afghanistan as people descended on the airport, trying to escape the Taliban authorities. The dreadful pictures of desperate mothers handing over their babies to unknown strangers in the hope that they might be taken to the west for a better future.

The raging civil war in Ethiopia. Perhaps the stories of this resonated more with me than with many because we went to Ethiopia four years ago and visited many of the towns where now there is fighting and bloodshed. Echoes of the genocide that happened in Rwanda some 25 years ago.

The pictures of tiny boats full of refugees battling the storms in the English channel. Of lifeboats trying to rescue those whose boats had capsized. Of people drowning by the dozen. Desperate people trying to find a future for themselves and their families. And being treated as less than human by some in authority

And on our doorstep, the murder of Arthur Labinjo Hughes. A young child desperate to be loved, but treated shamefully by those who should have looked after him. A young child whose pleas for help went unheard – lost in the darkness.

And of course of Covid. Hanging over us now for two years. People suffering and dying. Restrictions imposed and relaxed and reimposed. Will life ever be 'normal' again (indeed do we even know what normal is?)

And in all this darkness what can we say?

The traditional Christmas nativity picks up its story line from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The virgin birth, the trip to Bethlehem, no room at the inn, the baby in a manger, the shepherds in the fields and the angel host, the wise men and the gifts. It tells the story of a baby being born, in slightly unusual circumstances maybe, but still a baby. It tells us that Jesus was a real person. Born into a real family. Flesh and blood.

Both those gospels begin with lists of ancestors of Jesus. Matthew's list goes back to Abraham – the father of the Jewish nation. Luke takes his list back further to Adam – the first human. Again both stressing that Jesus was a flesh and blood human being whose roots went back in history.

The prologue to John's gospel leads us to deeper truths. John essentially takes Jesus back further – to God himself, to the uncreated. He starts his gospel account with the very same words that we find in Genesis at the start of the Bible, the story of creation. In the beginning .... In the beginning was the Word.

Luke and Matthew stress the humanity of Jesus – when we read John we are left with no doubts about his divinity. Jesus is God in human form. If we want to know about God – look at Jesus. If we want to know what a human being was created to be look at Jesus. We need to hold his humanity and his divinity together. They cannot be separated.

John uses the term "the word" to describe Jesus. He does this to stress that Jesus was not just a human being, but was God. Jesus was there with God, equivalent to God, from the very beginning of time.

Creation came into being when God spoke. God said ... and there was. If Jesus is the Word, then it was through him that creation happened.

Its telling to read in the early verses of Genesis that the very first act of creation was the creation of light. *And God said Let there be light, and there was light.* The Word of God brought light into being. At the very origins of history Jesus brought light into the world

What then does it mean when we talk of Jesus the light? What does it mean when we talk of the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it? What does it mean for us in the dark situations and dark places of the world today? Has this whole Christmas story, this mystery of God becoming a human being, got anything to say to the world today?

And yes, there are things it says.

First it says that God has not forgotten us or abandoned us. The picture of a God who created the world and now just sits back and dispassionately observes does not hold water. In Jesus, God himself came to live among us, to show us what being human could and should be like, to love us unconditionally and, through his act of self sacrifice show us the way back to God. In Jesus God experienced the highs and lows of life. Opposition, hatred, betrayal, suffering and ultimately death. In Jesus God was fully human – like one of us. He knows what it is like.

And second it says that darkness is not the whole picture.

We tend to focus on darkness. But it's a simple truth that darkness is just the absence of light. A small candle lightens a dark room. Over light darkness has no power. The message in the prologue to John is that Jesus the light has come into the world. He brings a hope that it doesn't have to be like this; that this is not the way God created it to be.

We can see from the gospel stories that where Jesus was there was life and light. Things began to change. Lives were turned around.

Experience and testimony says this is still true today. When we have Jesus with us we see things differently. He brings us comfort when needed and gives us strength to carry on. He enables us to carry his light into the dark places. By his example he shows us how to live and make a difference.

None of this means that those things that appear as darkneses will disappear, but it does mean that we have the power to bring light to them. Situations can and are changed by ordinary people like you and me living out our calling as lights in the world. Following the example of Jesus.

So where have we got to.

Yes – there are dark places, and dark situations in the world and we might think God has abandoned us.

But the Christmas message tells us differently. It tells us that God has come to live among us and show us the way to live; he has given us the example and the power to shine as lights and dispel the darkness. He has enabled us to be part of the solution and not the problem.

And that's good news not just for Christmas but for all time.

