

Read Archbishop Justin Welby's Christmas Day sermon at Canterbury Cathedral today.



Transcript of sermon as delivered:

John 1:1-14

Just this morning, I don't know if you heard the news, but I understand that the BBC said what I was going to say [congregation laughs] so the temptation is to just change it. Then I could say "Oh no I didn't", and then you could say [congregation joins in] "Oh yes you did!". I'll resist the urge.

Canterbury is such a wonderful place. It's a city of peace that celebrates Christmas gloriously. Last night, several thousand people were in the centre singing and laughing and enjoying themselves.

It was wonderful. It's a city of roughly 50,000 people. And now imagine a city five times the size of this one where its citizens face disease and war this December 25th, this very morning.

I was there in October. You won't have heard of it. It's a place called Beni in DRC, Congo. It has been at the centre of the second worst outbreak of Ebola in history; roughly three thousand people have died. Its Anglican bishop is alight with Christ, always present, always giving of himself.

And on top of that they also have militia groups. When I was there, they were fighting three to five kilometres from the city, but many had infiltrated it, were all around us.

Since then, they have attacked in the city again and again, aiming particularly at medics and doctors and those who seek to bring help and mercy.

A local resident called it the heart of darkness. The butchery and cruelty of the militia groups defies any other description.

In the Ebola treatment centres I visited, the patients were in air conditioned plastic cells. They could be seen and could see out, but there was no danger of spreading the infection.

In one that sticks in my mind was a whole family with a seriously ill mother. Her young children, one of them with no clothes, a tiny toddler being watched over and cared for, as best they could, by his elder siblings, scarcely much larger than him.

Darkness is a monster that lies. Its growling claims seem to call out with a louder volume than the love filled whispers of light. We see the shadows out of the corner of our eyes.

They may be violence as in the Congo or on London Bridge. They may be political. They may be purely personal, from family feuds, relationship problems, illness.

The darkness within us that sometimes seems to threaten our certainty and hope. And whether solid or illusion, they are the reality with which we live.

By contrast we do not *see* light, but we do see *truth* in light.

We saw in Beni the Ebola survivors who gave themselves to helping those who were ill, to bring them hope. Because they had the disease, they could be the only ones without the protective kit; the only faces that the ill saw, the only hands that they touched, the only voices that they could recognise.

I saw the survivors and heroes around us. We saw the selfless service of NGOs. We saw those from DfID and the Foreign Office, of whom we should be proud as they show the very best of our country, themselves at risk.

And above all we saw the unknown heroes.

Among them were the pastors of churches meeting for four days first to learn how to face Ebola, in a course written in part by Michael Beasley, the Bishop of Hertford.

It's not widely known but he is an expert on the epidemiology of Ebola. I didn't know that until I met him either.

And then they were so inspired, that overcoming the darkness of their fears they went to the Ebola Treatment Centres, braving the militias, braving the disease, to say to those who were there, "We will not ostracise you. We will not turn away from you."

The light of their witness overcame the dark.

St John in his first chapter calls Christians to receive the light of Christ; to point to the light because it is life and love, and brings hope. In the presence of the Light of Jesus Christ, dark is ultimately powerless.

Light is all around us, invisible, untouchable. Dark presses in on our deep fears. Its reality is manipulated by those who stir fear for their own purposes, both within and outside the life of the church.

It was to the poorest that the first testimony of Jesus came, to shepherds on a hill, in the angel broken dark. It was to Jesus' own poor family that the rich Magi came knowing that the light of Christ was the only hope that had reality.

When we neglect the poor, the weak, when we judge those different to ourselves rather than love, when we do things *to* people not with them, we defy the example of the light of life, Jesus himself, who in love came to them, with the poorest and most vulnerable. He did not come to the wealthy.

The true light that is Jesus brings hope.

A close friend was travelling with others in the South Sudan, along the Nile. The Diocese for which he worked had brought a boat. It turned out to be a canoe but with less wood than holes.

They set off down the Nile with the stream and the outboard failed. So they drifted for hours as night fell. It was so dark that he could not see the other people in the boat or even the outline of them.

He had a real sense that this was the end of his life. Then in the distance, they saw a light.

It was only an abandoned Italian mission hospital, but there was shelter, and there were people – shepherds as it happened – and a fire, and food.

It was a light of life, of welcoming love, of hope.

Light liberates. Light inspires action. Light reveals truth. Jesus is light, life and love.

As Christians, we are called to be the hope-creating witnesses to light, life and love. Not hope in ourselves, or in our own efforts, or in our strength or our wisdom, or even in our goodness and virtues.

In fact, the closer we get to the light the more our imperfections are revealed.

But we are witnesses to the hope given by the light of Christ, who came into the world not because we had brought him in, as John says, but because he chose to come in in such a way as to shine like that distant light in the middle of nowhere in the South Sudan.

In December 1942, during the Battle for Stalingrad, a pastor and doctor with the German army Lieutenant Kurt Reuber drew a charcoal picture of Mary holding Jesus. You can find it on Web.

It was Christmas, Christmas Day, all was grey and terrible; he was in a hole in the frozen mud. His Mary was a barefoot woman, a refugee cradling her child.

Around her were the words light, life, love: *Licht, Leben, Liebe*. He needed to bear witness even there that the dark could not win.

Witnessing to the light, life and love of Jesus every Christian becomes a Lieutenant Reuber, one who gives hope amidst the deepest darkness.

For if you are in darkness what do you desire? You desire Light.

If the darkness presses in from within you or without and menaces your existence what do you want? You want Life.

If the darkness overwhelms your sense of identity, what do you need? You need Love.

In our country, in our world light, life and love, bearing hope on their wings, are the gift we are given by Jesus Christ; they are gifts to be opened to all the world through our actions and words.

John starts his gospel with that reading we heard, a prose poem of light, life and love. Catch hold afresh of the gift offered by this baby. Let us catch it afresh.

Receive his light; it is there to be received. Feast on life and love, even when all else is dark and grey.

And so, being filled with the hope of Christ, let us as God's people show the dark that its pretensions are vain, for the true light has come into the world.

7 min read

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