



John 1:1-13

2020 has been for so many the darkness of Covid, of economic crisis, of climate emergency, evils of racism, of war, genocide and persecution. For billions around the world 2020 has been a year walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

It has been a year of anxiety. Anxiety can be reasonable or unreasonable. One of the family when much younger was terrified that a crocodile would climb up the vertical wall of the house to their attic bedroom and eat them. The reasoned arguments that there are no crocodiles in Nuneaton, that crocodiles can't climb walls, all these had no impact. It may have been something to do with seeing Peter Pan on the telly.

Our anxieties are not of that fanciful kind. They spring from the realities of life, familiar to so many in the world, long forgotten by us. They make a cough, a fever, feeling a bit under the weather, not an inconvenience but a genuine threat.

In this Christmas of absence, mourning and restrictions of all kinds are there any gifts of good news, of hope? There are many. The vaccine is a gift of hope. Our sense of community and mutual care has changed so much. Notwithstanding the politics or recent history, or the sadness or rejoicing of different groups over Brexit, the capacity of governments to find a way forward in relations after Brexit is a Christmas gift.

But above and beyond all these there is the simple history, the reality that the light came into the world and the darkness has not overcome it.

Not because we feel it or believe it or it works for us, but because the light of the birth of Jesus reveals God as God is.

Jesus Christ reveals God leaning into the darkness and defeating it through embracing every aspect of our sufferings and struggles, anxieties and fears.

2000 years later, the darkness has still not overcome the light. Empires have come and gone, tyrants have risen and fallen. Economies have emerged and collapsed. Science has offered us obliteration and solutions. Diseases have swept the planet or been eliminated. Wars have threatened human destruction and good people united for peace. Treaties are made and broken.

But **the** defining event of human history is the coming of the light. As much as we may currently be tempted to imagine this virus as the pivot of our lives – ‘Before Covid and After Covid’ – the pivot for every life, for human history is in fact the coming of the light of Christ.

For all the events of history are judged, are weighed, assessed by this light. It is this light of Christ that is truth and cannot lie. It is this light of Christ that shows the way for a good society, for a good human being, for a good church and at the same time shines hospitably welcoming all to its comfort. It is this light of Christ that offers abundant life that scatters fear and brings hope in a time of Covid, of economic trauma, of war.

It is this light that still shines around the world, that shines today on leaders in South Sudan calling them to embrace its hope and go on making peace. They were appealed to afresh in a letter yesterday from the Pope, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and me. That letter is a step of extraordinary collaboration: it emerges from seeking to follow this light.

It is a light that shines in every place and every heart, believing or not, calling for a better way, a light of judgement in love for every leader, of hope in darkness for every abandoned or agonised human being.

We recognise the light shining in a society that because of our Christian heritage – even if not current belief - thinks it matters fundamentally that the poor are cared for, that the hungry are fed, that the sick have access to the health care they need, that children are educated, that the elderly are cherished and protected.

We see that light in the food banks of Dover, in those helping across every part of Kent, where amidst much struggle people are cared for by local government and by volunteers. We see that light in the hospitals where people offer their life and their future, in the schools looking to the long-term hopes of the next generation. We praise God for that light which has so penetrated this land and so many other lands, the light that calls us back to its source.

The source of that light is God. Not terrifyingly tyrannically demanding, but the self-emptying God who is Jesus the baby in the manger, the

wandering preacher who is love and light and freedom, the helpless prisoner on the cross. It is because darkness cannot conquer that we will celebrate the vacant slab in the empty tomb, the upward looking disciples at the Ascension and the Church empowered by the spirit of God.

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

Therefore, even at the end of 2020, year of the valley of the shadow of death, we celebrate the light of Jesus Christ – for we are not alone but God has come to our aid. God has shone a light and this light has not been, is not and will not be overcome by the darkness.

Christians must be the witnesses to the hope the light brings us, to the truth it tells, to the correction it demands and the path it defines for our lives.

The light is the light of Jesus Christ and so we do not witness to a moral code but to a person. Jesus comes vulnerably yet overwhelmingly, willing to be disregarded yet utterly compelling. John begins his gospel of witness saying that this light from above is a person in whom we are called to believe and whose light we must follow.

We share the light in our witness not as a duty but in love with the suffering. We share it while weeping for the dying and with the bereaved. We share the light in anger against cruelty and injustice, we testify to the light of Christ to the despairing in deep compassion and sensitivity.

Like the baby in the manger we neither compel nor manipulate, but our witness is always packaged in God's endless and fathomless love, the love that sheds the true light that is never overcome.

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