

SHEFFIELD CIRCUIT SERVICE

13 DECEMBER 2020 (ONLINE)

THEME: "THE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS" (JOHN 1:5)

1. INTRODUCTION

I greet you all in the Name of Christ, and wish upon you the peace and blessings of God.

It is a pleasure to share with you.

I want to say to you that I am offering this sermon at the request of James Morley, who is now one of my Superintendent Ministers.

This is very special for me, because I held James in my arms just a few days after he was born in Manchester, when I went to visit him, and his mum and dad.

Now James is my boss. Wonderful

James, I wish you and Sally Coleman, and Lisa Quarmby, and all our colleagues in the Circuit well.

I want to thank you and all your team for all you do to keep hope alive, and keep everyone connected

Now let us turn to our theme.

My sermon is inspired by the words read from the Gospel according to John.

I will briefly reflect on John's primary assertion that the Word became flesh; I will briefly say what is revealed of God in Jesus. I will then look at the idea of the light that shines in the darkness; and conclude with some thoughts on the implications of all this for ministry and pastoral care.

And where does John the Baptist fit into all this?

Imagine a small band of people meeting in the name of Jesus for reflection and prayer, and to worship God. They are few. And they are afraid of what is happening in the world around them. There is turmoil. They feel like an insignificant minority, in a world where others seem to have greater numbers and more power, and they are uncertain of their future. It feels to them that they are sitting in the darkness. In fact, fear is the word that sums up their world. They long for some good news. They hold on to God, and centre their lives on Jesus Christ.

Is that us?

Do our Bible readings this morning offer us any illumination in this reality?

2. FIRST THEN, THE JOHANINE ASSERTION: AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH

There are Scholars who believe that the reflections we call the Gospel according to John are based on the experiences of a small congregation in Jerusalem. The congregation is centred on exclusive loyalty to Jesus Christ, and who are working out what it means to be a community of Christ when you are small in number, surrounded by a powerful larger community. Some of them, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are secret followers of Jesus and still adhere to worship in the Synagogue. They are wrestling with where their worship home is, and many have been expelled

from other local worship centres (John 9:34). In some ways they feel they are in the dark, not completely sure of their identity, and are fearful of the future.

They meet as a small group, behind locked doors (20:19) for fear of what is going on around them.

They are committed to God, and are deeply loyal to Jesus.

They also believe they are at the beginning of something new, a new creation, that God is among them in a new way, they are discerning new insights into who God is and how God is with them.

Where does their vision and hope lie?

The opening words of John Chapter 1 hold up a key idea, and that is light, light that is not overwhelmed or put out, light that “enlightens everyone”.

The light that enlightens everyone is the concept John Wesley used to form his doctrine of Prevenient Grace, the grace, “that of God”, that is in everyone.

There is One light, the One central principle of all creation, the source of all life and light, the Light that “enlightens everyone”.

All around the world people awaken and respond to this One Light.

Throughout my ministry I have been held together by my theology which is centred on the opening words of the Gospel according to St John which hold up and points to the logos, the Word, and declares that this “Word became flesh”, and is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, who is the core, and essence, the logo of the Christian faith.

“And the Word became flesh” (John 1:14), in Jesus of Nazareth.

There are no nativity stories in the Gospel according to John. No Stable, no Manger, no Shepherds and Wise Men, no Choirs of Angels. But a bold claim summed up in five words:

And the Word became flesh.

I love this sentence. My theology of sanctuary is rooted in these words. What they mean is that God chooses to pitch a tent, a sanctuary, among people.

This is the Johannine way of saying that Jesus symbolises the good news that God is with us.

No one has to find or go to God.

There are not many paths to God.

There is indeed only one way revealed in Jesus, and that is that God comes to us, always.

From here comes another bold claim that Jesus “has made him known” (John 1:18).

The Gospel according to John begins with this bold assertion.

The rest of the reflections in John give us a picture of Jesus, what is revealed of God in him, what God calls us to, and offer reflections on this.

What we must bear in mind when we say God is revealed in Jesus is that the Gospel according to John gives us one clue, just one insight into who Jesus is. There are at least three other clues and we have them in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John we have a humble admission that there are “other signs”, clues to God’s revelation in Jesus “which are not written in this book” (John 20:30), and also

that sometimes what Jesus said was interpreted differently by his followers (John 21:20-23). With this humility let us take a brief look at God as revealed in Jesus.

3. NOW WE TURN TO WHAT IS REVEALED IN CHRIST: GOD IS WITH US

What does it mean to say that the light shines in the world?

In John It means, God is with us. This is what is revealed in Christ.

What is the picture of God that emerges according to John? How is God with us?

We see this picture in revelatory windows into God who blesses people with “grace upon grace” (Jn 1:16). What is seen of the God revealed in Jesus:

- God is seen in abundance. God is in everyday events like the wedding in Cana. The new world God is creating is envisaged in the wedding feast, a banquet where all are served the very best. At this banquet God is the host, and God desires the best for all (2:1-11; 6:5-14; 21:4-19). God’s hospitality knows no bounds
- God is seen in action for justice. God the host welcomes all and turns no one away (6:37). The overturning of tables in the Temple, challenging excluding and exploitative structures affirm that God’s house is a house of prayer for all. God hears the prayers of all people (2:13-22). God’s house called heaven is no less, it is a house with many room (14:1-7)
- God is seen in surprising ways and places. God is not worshipped in a place but “in spirit and truth”, and the Spirit of God is seen as “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”, flowing like grace upon grace (4:7-42)
- God’s will and hand is seen in healing and wholesome life, not harm or hurt (4:46-54; 5:1-15; 9:1-7; 11:1-45)
- God is seen in the humility of service like washing dirty feet (John 13)
- God is seen as a companion in the turbulent waters of life, and the agonies of experiences of pain and crucifixion (6:16-24; 18 and 19)
- God is seen in the promise of new life and hope of resurrection, always (20:1-30)

These are signs of God’s presence and action. They reveal God who is like the light that shines and is not overwhelmed. All this had to be stated before the words of Jesus’ “follow me” are spoken right at the end, at Chapter 21:19. Following Jesus is along a pathway of abundance, justice, prayer, healing, service, suffering and hope. It is a pathway of sacrifice, not security.

4. NOW LET US CONSIDER GOD: THE LIGHT THAT SHINES AND ENLIGHTENS EVERYONE

I warm to the image of God as light, but I do not like to contrast this light with darkness.

Light and dark are not opposites, even if and when they appear to be.

I like what the Psalmist wrote when reflecting on where one could go to get away from God. The answer is, nowhere. And surmises:

If I say surely darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139: 12).

The readers of the opening words of the Gospel according to John, “in the beginning” are required to recall and reflect on the opening words of Genesis Chapter 1.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1-2).

God is present in and speaks and acts and creates everything out of the primordial deep and darkness [Genesis 1:1-2]. Everything flows from this in the Bible. In my view the two opening verses of the Bible summarise its whole content. All that follows these two opening verses illustrates the creative and life-giving God who is with people and accompanies them in all experiences. All life is dark and deep, chaotic and formless. God is always present in it creating, speaking wisdom and making all things new [Isaiah 43:19; 65:17; Revelations 21:5].

Creation out of nothing [ex nihilo]. God dwells in and creates within and out of all that is represented by the darkness and the deep.

Our reading from Isaiah 61 asserts that the Spirit of God continues to inspire the work of God. God is making a new world which is envisioned as:

- Good news to the oppressed
- Binding the broken hearted
- Release to those held in bondage
- Strength to those who mourn
- Justice and liberty
- Environmental justice

God calls on all people to share in this work and to provide care for all created things, and to do all things with wisdom (Genesis 1:26-28).

5. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF ALL THIS FOR MINISTRY AND PASTORAL CARE? FINDING GOD, GRACE AND ILLUMINATION IN DARKNESS

Pointing to God in the darkness is the work of any good minister and guru, and to model exactly that. To be prepared to dwell in darkness, to accompany people in darkness, and to do all things with wisdom.

We find God, grace and illumination in the darkness. This is the good news and hope we uphold.

Ministry is not about leading anyone from darkness to light. The word guru is composed of Gu and Ru. Gu refers to that which is dark. Ru refers to light, *ruach* the spirit of God.

A true guru, a good pastor will sit in the darkness with people and help them to find wisdom from the deep, and find stillness within the stirring of life and the whirlpool of the mind, a strength within the state that is called mental illness.

A true guru does not say there is a silver lining to every cloud, and does not speak of light at the end of the tunnel. A true guru is tuned in to the attendance and echo of God in the storm, points to God in the shadows, and helps people to see darkness as a place of sacredness, not scaredness.

So a good minister or leader or mentor will not hurry people out of darkness, or speak negatively of emptiness but revel in its holiness.

Fear is real. It is related to the world around us, Covid-19, Climate Change, extreme weather, ethnic and religious diversity.

The Woolf Report How We Get Along, published on 16th November 2020 describes religion as the "final frontier" of fear and personal prejudice. The study says that attitudes to faith drive negative attitudes more than matters of ethnicity or nationality. The deepest prejudice relates to and is triggered by the word Muslim. This prejudice is strongest in people aged over seventy-five.

The Johannine community were fearful of the "Jewish authorities" (20:19).

We have to acknowledge that the fearful attitudes of the Johnannine community towards Jewish authorities has contributed to irrational Christian anti-semitism over the last two thousand years.

Fear of those who exercise power over us is real. Power so often is about majorities and minorities whether you are in USA or Ethiopia or Azerbaijan and Armenia, as we can see from conflicts in the world today.

So many of the conflicts around and among us are about majorities and minorities, whether it is about church or creed or colour or culture.

Minorities lives in fear. They are demonised, and demons are usually seen as dark.

It is irrational to associate the things or people we fear with darkness, or blackness.

Many associate despair and difficulties with darkness. Some speak of their experiences of being enslaved in dungeons, without any kind of light, and also as refugees in camps without light.

We have to re-examine the way darkness is related to anything to be feared, with hurtful things and realities, and light with good things and wholesome realities.

I commend to you Cathy Bird's book, The Divine Heart of Darkness, Cathy Bird describes herself as a "friend of darkness" who likes to make darkness "visible". Darkness is not eliminated by light but "made visible by the light" where "darkness gives life to light". Cathy reminds us that we need the dark to help us see the light. She insists that darkness is a place and time of sacredness, not scaredness.

Cathy's reflections on death as entering darkness is so helpful. She writes of "the ultimate paradox of the Christian faith that love leads to grief". In her words, "we think that light is the source of life - yet it is in darkness that all living things have their naissance, in the womb, in the earth, in the seed, in the tomb, the absence of light is necessary for life to take hold". Entrance into darkness is not an entrance into disintegration and disappearance, it is an entrance into a place of recreation into new life.

Cathy's book challenges us all to examine how we use and understand and speak of light and darkness. What do you normally associate with darkness and light? How do you use the concept of darkness and light in your prayers and worship and liturgy?

Christmas season is a good time for such reflection. Study the way light and dark are used in Christmas carols.

Many years ago, I bought a copy of the book The Owl Who Was Afraid of the Dark [Jill Tomlinson, 1968, Methuen & Co Ltd, London] to help children overcome fear of dark. I would buy and give Cathy's book to adults who are afraid of the dark.

Let me move to a close by saying this.

So often in the practice of ministry I, and people I have worked with, have found ourselves completely in the dark, and people have looked to me for answers, to rescue them, and all I have been able to say is: this is not easy, I have nothing to offer, we must not lose our nerve now and look for easy answers. Lets us stay in this difficult space, and pray for wisdom. And invariably wisdom, illumination and ways forward have emerged within the times of darkness.

For example, fifteen years ago many people looked to me for some way of working positively with refugees.

At a meeting I convened in a difficult space, the Furnival, the idea of City of Sanctuary emerged. Today there are nearly 150 cities, towns and villages working with the vision of City of sanctuary. There are scores of schools of sanctuary, there are universities, theatres, gardens, hospitals and cathedrals of sanctuary.

I am now working to develop churches of sanctuary with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. I want to challenge churches in our circuit to engage with this idea. I will help you.

Now, John the Baptist is not the first New Testament person who normally comes to mind when we are thinking of a good role model in ministry.

Our reading however holds him up before us.

What is the first thing said about him?

He was a man of God. What makes him a man of God?

In the words of John 1:8 "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

Testify to the light, light that shines in the tunnel.

This is what we learn from John the Baptist.

He points to Christ, to light, his hope is to illuminate the light that shines in the dark.

This is a calling for us all.

This is the Gospel of Christ.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS: MORE QUESTION MARKS THAN ANSWERS

I am sorry to deliver this sermon by zoom.

The Word became flesh.

This is an important message in the context of Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown. We want physical presence. We've had enough of zoom and virtual reality. I'm sure we will be able to meet physically soon.

Keep holding up the light of God in Christ.

Inderjit Bhogal

