

## Reflections and Prayers: Darkness before the Light

This is the 34<sup>th</sup> in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

### Walking to the post-box late at night

There's a post-box just over the main road at the end of the driveway into The Old Orchard where we live. Daily collections are at 9 am except for 7 am on Saturday. I'm not an early bird – as a student, I preferred working into the night, rather than rising early – though I have a local friend who still rises at 5.30 am every day. We're on different time clocks and some readers will identify with one or the other of us.

Most Fridays, often near midnight, I walk along to the post-box to ensure these Reflections catch the Saturday collection for Don, a particular reader, who doesn't access email. It hardly takes five minutes, there and back, but I usually spin it out to last a little longer. There is something compelling about the darkness and the night – the moon and stars, the quiet, the lack of traffic, the absence of people, the peace. We shall return to that.

Over the years I have had reason to drive long distances late in the evening and in the early morning hours, whether it was to meet Joan for short weekends before we married (she lived in Gateshead, I lived in Crawley, but my parents were conveniently in Leeds!) and later on business in Britain and the Netherlands. For me, it was the most enjoyable time to drive, in the still night air, when roads were deserted, even around Hyde Park Corner, London at midnight.

For decades, the congregation of Norley Methodist Church used to go carol-singing in and around the village on the evenings before Christmas. On one occasion, Craig, then about 9, nudged me, pointing his little torch's beam to the heavens in a particular direction and said to me, 'look, that's Orion'. I was captivated as I admired his knowledge, contemplated the night sky in my astronomical ignorance but knowing vaguely that the visible light to which Craig pointed had left its origin long before the birth of the Christ child which we were sharing in our carols. I still struggle to get my head around this. And was it not similar knowledge that led certain wise enquirers towards Bethlehem?

There's something indeed about darkness and night. This week's Reflections focus on the darkness which comes before the light, as we reflect on our present situation and anticipate Advent and the coming of Jesus, the light of the world. Don't be despondent!

### Creation – Genesis 1: 1-5 – light and day, darkness and night

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called night' – in general, that is.



Being strategic, God didn't trouble with the detail of some aspects of the subsequent operation of the created universe in which earth revolves around the 'greater light to rule the day' (verse 16) aka the sun (one of the heavens), so that parts of earth, later to be named Arctic and Antarctic and all the countries therein, would have light all the time in summer, darkness all the time in winter and their summer and winter at opposite times of the year. In those places, for weeks on end, day (as well as night) is darkness and night (as well as day) is light. But God kept it simple and decided not to spell this out in the beginning.

*Photo by Joan Bell, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019, at three minutes after midnight. The sun at Billefjorden, Spitsbergen, at its lowest point in the sky. Its latitude is 78.5° North.*

## The blessings of day and night, light and darkness

Day and night, light and darkness bring their respective and contrasting blessings. Days are for work and activity, nights for rest and sleep, unless you work shifts. We live in a 24/7 economy and society in which you can shop at your favourite supermarket at 3 am. Is it busy then? I have yet to discover. But then there were always industries which worked around the clock – chemicals, coalmining, power generation, health, emergency and postal services, glassmaking, transport – to fulfil needs and some because they aren't easily turned on and off.

Human beings, unlike some animal species, are not inherently nocturnal. Even in creation God didn't work at night: a new dawn, a new challenge, what shall we make today? Do you ask yourself similar questions every morning? What is planned? What is on the 'to do' list? Are there meetings to be attended, via Zoom at the moment (ah, bliss!), or appointments to be kept? What to prepare for lunch or dinner? What's on the radio or TV? What's the weather forecast – how about a walk? Days tend to be about the present, the here and now, the nearby (especially when we can't go too far from home at the moment).

Nights are altogether different; you may recall the song 'Music of the Night' from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, which includes the verse:

'Slowly, gently, night unfurls its splendour,  
Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender,  
Turn your face away from the garish of the day,  
Turn your thoughts away from cold unfeeling light  
And listen to the music of the night.'

This may seem poetic, romantic and counterintuitive, but is there something magical and mysterious about the night? As Craig sought to demonstrate with his torch, night reveals a staggering panorama of God's created universe which we never see at day. Night is about the distant, the past and the future – remember Patrick Moore's TV programme 'The Sky at Night'. If day evokes the immediate and practical, night reminds us of the cosmic and theological.

But darkness and night also bring fear and, for some, loneliness, in a way that day does not. Frederick Hosmer in his hymn (MHB 742, verse 2) writes, 'but the slow watches of the night no less to God belong' before 'the flags of dawn appear' (in verse 3). For some, the night's sleepless watches are indeed slow, as every hour ticks by, tossing restlessly to and fro, and dawn comes with relief: morning has broken, another new day. Richard Gillard uses the imagery in his words 'I will hold the Christ light for you in the night-time of your fear' (StF 611, R&S 474 verse 3) to approach the human condition that we associate darkness and night with the low and troubled times of life.

## Day and night, light and darkness as metaphors

We link light with day and darkness with night and often use the pairs of words to convey the same feeling or meaning. They partly overlap but they are not synonymous. Light, life and hope are uplifting words; darkness, night, despair and death are the opposite; we look for signs and moments of the former when we experience the emotions and reality of the latter.

We speak of 'dark periods in our lives' and 'the dark days of war'. Robert Rinder's moving and concluding words, in the recent TV programme about the Treblinka concentration camp in Poland where so many Jewish people lost their lives during the Holocaust, were, 'the night will pass, the sun will rise'.

The present world pandemic crisis is, for many people, a time of darkness. There have been false dawns, to be overtaken by renewed periods of restriction and, for some, effective imprisonment. The denial of human contact with close family members, especially those in care homes, is heart-breaking; daughters, sons, grandchildren long to give their parents or grandparents a loving hug. As it is, in a care home, what limited encounter, if any, is permitted is through a perspex screen: as one daughter (a correspondent for *The Times*) put it, 'I had to ask the carer, dressed in full PPE kit, to give my mother a hug for me while I looked on'.

Indeed, in addition to the tragedy of unexpected loss of life, the coronavirus has brought adverse consequences on physical health, as other medical procedures and treatments have been delayed, and on the working lives of millions of people, intermittently furloughed, or whose employment has been terminated. Even if some businesses are suddenly prospering (indeed, cashing in), there are daily reports of others, large and small, going to the wall, despite the financial support from the government.

Unsurprisingly, there is also evidence of mental health problems. In October, *The Economist* reported that over 10% of Americans have thought of suicide because of the pandemic: this is a frighteningly high figure. *The Times* reported on a survey this week by a UK mental health campaign group that 44% of men feel they have no one to talk to because of loss of normal work and social contact. The medical professionals who feature at the Downing Street briefings always mention the mental health issues consequential on the pandemic's restrictions.

These can be dark days, often literally as well as metaphorically, but to quote the leading article in *The Economist* this week, 'suddenly, in a dark winter, there is hope', as it reported the good news of promising breakthroughs in finding an effective vaccination against coronavirus. It can't come soon enough, but meanwhile we reflect, as Advent approaches, on the constant Christian message of darkness leading to light.

### 'After darkness, light, alleluia' (StF 292 verse 1)

In the words of Bernhardt Ingemann's hymn (H&P 441 verse 1, slightly adapted: go on – sing it out loud!),  
'Through the night of doubt and sorrow, onward goes the pilgrim band,  
Praying for a vaccination, hoping for the promised land'.

The Reflections in Advent will remind us that, even in this time of darkness, the eternal promise of the light, life and hope of Christ will come to lift our spirits. Meanwhile, we can reflect on the cornerstone of our Christian faith that, after the darkness of Good Friday's crucifixion came the radiant light of Easter Day's resurrection.

### Prayers for each other

Loving God, we continue to live through these strange times, our regular patterns of life changed, so much uncertain about the future and what a new normal life will look and feel like. We pray especially with and for those people hardest hit by isolation and the constraints we all suffer, for whom these are dark days.

We pause in silence as we think of particular people – family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues – and ask that God will uphold them as we do in prayer.

### And for us all:

Lighten our darkness, we pray thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of the night; that, awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus. Amen.

*Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer.*

*Words in this edition of Reflections are by John Bell, November 2020. You'll be glad to know that a variety of writers will be contributing during the period of Advent.*

### Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at [belljohna@btinternet.com](mailto:belljohna@btinternet.com) Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.

