

An Address by Howard Friend, 13 December 2020 - 3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61 vs 1-4 and 8 – end & John 1 vs 6-8 and 19-28

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that true Light. So that through him all might believe.

Looking from Darkness towards Light is a powerful Advent theme, many of us appreciate the symbolism of these candles.

We always assume I think that Light is Good, and Darkness is bad. But is that right. Is God not in the darkness too?

I want to share a little quip I heard from Mike Brearly, the former England cricket captain. He was being interviewed on Private Passions, Radio 3's posh version of Desert Island Discs. More Monteverdi than Mantovani, but I'm sure you know that. He was a famously cerebral captain and had a second career as a Psychotherapist. In the course of their conversation he revealed to Michael Barclay, the host, that he sometimes says to his patients 'I hope I can shed a little darkness on the subject of your problem – to make you uncomfortable – to cause you to think.'

My first thought on hearing that surprising admission was: Well he would say that wouldn't he? - a psychotherapist has a vested interest in not shedding too much light on his patients mental processes, less he cures him too quickly and loses his weekly fee. But that's possibly a very uncharitable thought.

And then I thought to myself – concerning our own spiritual journey, - are we not just as likely to find God in the Darkness as in the Light. Perhaps even more so?

When we are up against it in our lives for whatever reason, it's then we ask the important questions – like:- Where are you God ? And let's be honest many of us have had plenty of time and opportunity to ask just that sort of question recently. Maybe you're stuck in your own particular darkness right now – and the answers don't come easily do they?

John the Baptist didn't exactly have an easy time of it, himself, did he, preparing the way for Jesus, the True Light of the World? He was put in prison for speaking out against Herod Antipas and his marital shenanigans. It was while he was in prison – a very dark place by anybody's reckoning - that he sent that extraordinary delegation to Jesus – asking - Are you really the Messiah? He had already on several occasions proclaimed him so.

So - even in the presence of The Light of the World, even then he had his doubts.

And – it didn't end well for him did it?

Note that another Gospel account records that Jesus affirms John despite his question. Doesn't condemn or ridicule his doubt. Calls him great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

However Jesus didn't organise John's escape from prison did he? And that fact illustrates the difficulty of this subject, which I certainly can't fully explain in the 10 mins I've got this morning. There is no entirely satisfactory answer yet as to why Bad things happen to Good people, why sometimes we find ourselves in Darkness not of our own making. But a lifetime's experience has taught me that you often discover a lot about yourself and a bit more about God in the dark places of life

We cannot, I suggest, separate God from darkness any more than we can from light. In Genesis 1 we read 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering there. God was in the darkness from the very beginning. The other compelling reason we have from Scripture to suggest that God is with us in our darkness is that God the Son, endured the darkness of the cross for our sakes. My God, my God why have you forsaken me.

So darkness is part of the creative expression of God - and on the cross Jesus experienced a terrible darkness in order to procure our salvation. He understands and is with us in our darkness.

So - it's not cricket - but perhaps the Mike Brearley approach - spreading a little darkness, is not as crazy as it sounds. Causes us to think.

And while we're in thinking mode. We should think clearly about what our responsibilities are in helping others in their darkness.

I wasn't surprised last week when Nigel announced that we had collected 70 shoe boxes for Moldovan folk this Christmas. This congregation - I have learned - has a big heart for the disadvantaged, for those who find themselves in a dark place.

The writer of our passage from Isaiah felt a clear imperative from God to bring the good news to those who most needed it. Jesus himself adopted those words for his ministry of announcing the Kingdom of God - and so, I suggest, should we. May I encourage you - as I do myself - to continue to :

Bind up the broken hearted

Comfort all who mourn

Provide for those who despair.

There's plenty of opportunity for us at the moment for us to reach out to others who are not doing so well in the darkness - to stand with them in their troubles is usually what is most appreciated. Best I suggest to avoid the mistakes of Job's comforters and not give unsolicited advice.

Finally - a bit of Psalm 139, which I know many of you love , as do I.

And if I may add a small but important caveat. The first line 'Where can I go from your Spirit' and the following thoughts are not an expression of his being confined but his comfort that God is there for him anywhere and everywhere.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens you are there.

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there also.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn

If I settle on the far side of the sea

Even there your hand will guide me

Your right hand will hold me fast

If I say surely the darkness will hide me

And the light become night around me

Even the darkness will not be dark to you

The night will shine like the day

For darkness is as light to you.