

## Bennochy church 10th December 2017

Have you ever noticed how many films there are, where the majority of scenes are shot in darkness. You peer into the TV trying to see what is going on. You say to yourself, why are you going into that forest, cave, or unlit stairwell / corridor at night. Don't you know what is going to happen! Don't be daft, just wait till the morning, then we can all see where you are going, and there will be none of those nasty surprises. I am a bit of a Science Fiction junkie and it is amazing the number of alien planets where it seems to be dark all the time. It of course, all adds to the suspense.

Darkness can be a frightening place. The path is hidden and the way ahead is unclear. It is difficult in the darkness to find a safe route. The dangers ahead are hidden.

I don't think we were made to live in darkness. We cling to any source of light, like a moth, we are drawn to the light. From the first sparks of fire in human history to the glow of eco friendly bulbs, we need light to survive. To live. In the darkness it is very hard to live life to the full. Darkness makes us tentative and we feel for the way ahead. We move slowly and we are unsure of the future.

Strange as it sounds, we can live in darkness even in the full glare of the sun. Our eyes might see the way ahead and the road is clear, but in our hearts we see only a future that is dark,

one full of shadows, and we wonder how we will get through the day.

*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows but now light is shining on them." (Isaiah 9: 2)*

It does not matter the historical context, there may be more than one. But in the aftermath of the northern kingdom of Samaria's defeat by the Assyrian forces in the 8th century BC, here, God brings a sense of hope into chaos, and the bible is quite clear on this, a chaos of their own making.

This is not a prophecy of wishful thinking, it is based on Israel's understanding of the faithfulness of God and a confidence, in the fulfilment his promises. God is active in the affairs of humankind and he will save his people. He has done it before; out of Egypt, he will do it again.

In the book of Job, darkness is used to describe the land of the dead. It is literally a land of shadows, but here, there is a language of vivid contrasts; darkness becomes light, joy, freedom and victory, like the 300 men of Israel, who under Gideon, defeated the army of Midian. You can read about that in Judges chapter seven. This prophecy is about restoration to new life. *"I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness."* (John 10:10) The words of Jesus in John chapter 10.

The church has always made a connection between the birth of Jesus and this prophecy of Isaiah. *"A child is born to us! A son is given!"* (v6) In its original context, a possible reference to the coming of a new king of Israel, who were seen as God's adopted sons. His ancient names, *'Wonderful', 'Counsellor', 'Mighty God', 'Eternal father',* and *'Prince of peace'* were never realised in the future history of Israel, but became a powerful element in their hope for a Messiah. A hope no human monarch could ever fulfil and a Kingdom that reached beyond this world. Here lies the faith of the people of God. A light that shines into the darkness, never to be extinguished, in spite of everything that had, or might happen to them.

It therefore comes as no surprise, that these very prophecies are laid upon the shoulders of Jesus. He takes on the mantle of the 'child born' for the waiting people of God. He becomes the embodiment of the light of the world. *"I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness."* In a child, the Messiah has arrived. In a back yard, the Kingdom of God is here.

This prophecy of Isaiah, in a sense becomes the poetry and praise of Mary. The power of Israel's historical victories in battle, becomes the vulnerability of a new born child, and fulfils the ancient promise of God. God now acts in a new way to scatter the proud, bring down the mighty, lift up the powerless,

feed the hungry and bring in a new Kingdom, where the rich are sent away empty handed. Everything is now turned upside.

It is a new Kingdom. But it is one that is easy to miss. It is all wrapped up in the tinsel of Christmas and we get easily distracted. For what lies in the shadow of the Christmas card nativity, is a cross, and later, an empty tomb. The gifts of ancient Magi, they are worthless, compared with the gift of new life offered in Jesus Christ. And do we hear what the angels said?

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased"*. (v14)

Are we listening? That our hearts and minds might also travel to a back yard in Bethlehem.

This Advent time, let us be amazed at what we will see. Poverty becomes rich in its love. Ancient prophecy, once again rings true in our ears, and darkness, well, it is cast aside by the coming light of the world. He is *Immanuel*. God with us. Amen