

## Bennochy church: 26th January 2020

It's an enduring image, *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.*

What does that image conjure up in your mind? How does it stimulate your imagination? What do you see? I see many people, hands out, trying to feel the way ahead. They cannot see their hand in front of their face. They are fearful, trying not to stumble over the unseen obstacles that lie in their path. They lack direction. There seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. They have lost all control of their environment. They feel powerless and fearful.

Have you ever got out of bed in the middle of the night, feeling for the wall and hoping not to stub your toe on the end of the bed, desperately looking for the light switch. Well, imagine there is no light switch. You are consigned to stumbling about in the darkness, for what seems like an eternity. For all purposes you are blind. You do not know what lies ahead, and then, and the image suggests suddenness, now, *light is shining on them.*

The people of the shadows, have become people who live in the light. That is what I am calling a 'God contrast'. Isaiah says to the people, it does not matter what the situation is right now, your hope is in the light to come. But when? That is the question, as hope reaches into an unknown future.

We need to set some historical context. Isaiah began to speak to God's people around the 740's BC. In 722 /21 BC a cataclysmic event happened. The growing empire of Assyria invaded and effectively destroyed the northern part of the ancient kingdom of Israel and In 701 BC they were at the gates of Jerusalem. It was indeed a very dark time in the history of God's people.

But also behind this image, is the ancient idea of how they understand the world of the dead. At the time of Isaiah, they did not have a clear understanding of life after death. They believed in a world of Sheol. It was the place everyone went to after death, and Sheol was a world of shadows. So to be in darkness, was to be in a place similar to death.

It is just an image and one that is open to multiple interpretations. For the nation of Israel it was probably about a future king. One who would seek God's ways and lead his people as a righteous king. The child to be born, is a reference to the ascension of the king, who becomes by adoption, God's son and not only that, he becomes what his names signify. So the hope of Israel will be in their king. It was a dream never realised in history, but it became part of Jewish messianic hope.

In the world of the early church, this passage morphed into a prophecy, about the coming Christ child. The end result was exactly the same. God would bring salvation to his people. The invading armies would be defeated and the long promised Messiah would finally arrive. For the people of God, this was

no wishful thinking. it was a certainty, based on God being active in his world.

Out of darkness, they would live in a world , bathed in the new light of Gods protection and promise. The burden of the yoke is lifted. The beating of the rod upon their shoulders ceases. They are no longer be slaves or oppressed by invaders. In fact, God's victory will be like that of Gideon, who defeated the Midianites with only 100 men as recorded in Judges chapter seven.

In the land of shadows there is no joy, but when God's light shines, everything changes. This passage becomes one of life, symbolised, but also made real, in the great harvests to come. There would even be captured wealth to be divided out . No longer on the losing side, but God' side. All of this, because of the birth of a child, who would be;

*"Wonderful Counsellor", "mighty God," "Eternal father," "Prince of Peace".*

No wonder this passage has become part of the Christmas story. We have adopted this great oracle of hope, celebrating the birth of the Christ child.

History has shown that it is never that easy! Empires rise and fall. And After the collapse of the Assyrians came the Babylonians, who near the beginning of the 6th century BC, destroyed Jerusalem and took God's people into exile. No joy. No great harvest and the shackles are back on. What are we to

make of such events that seem to destroy the promised hope? Well what happens is this , passages such as these, are simply reinterpreted.

So who is the child for us today? Where does our hope come from? Let's not try to over spiritualise the image of darkness, for Isaiah it was the reality of events going on round about him, but there is a need to reconnect with it, and I think we can do that, if we overlying the many, what some call evils; the way we are failing creation, of inhumanity, how treat others and our own personal experience, how we live, how we understand failure, and say, that for us today, that is how we understand that place of darkness.

I think it is perfectly legitimate, in looking back to the recent events of Christmas, to see in the story of 'incarnation', that Immanuel, 'God with us', is both future king and Christ child.

It is our hope, that God's kingdom, here and still to come, will indeed be based on his power and justice, from now until the end of time.

It is our hope, that the Lord Almighty is indeed, determined to do all this.

It is our hope, as we wait in faith and walk with Christ. Amen.