

# *the One who is darkness beyond light*

a sermon preached on the

## *Feast of the Incarnation*

25 December 2014

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

At this joyous feast we celebrate the “revealing of the mystery that was hidden for ages in God who created all things”.<sup>1</sup> The church does this *in darkness* – midnight is deliberate, and inspired.

Perhaps we may have been given the impression that the Christian message is a collection of tidy, prudent beliefs, worthy words and pious ideas to be correctly regurgitated before the celestial headmaster? Actually, in spite of what you might have been told, the gospel does not function like that – neither does the liturgy. What’s offered here – including my words – is more like a painting, a poem, a song. How else, except with all the senses engaged – by candlelight, in the mode of poetry, symbol, gesture and ritual action – could we catch a glimpse of the unfathomable Ultimate Mystery. Lovers understand this.

And everyone knows that the only way to really see the stars is to get out of the city – to get far enough into dark country so that there’s the least possible interference. An experience of the night sky in a truly dark place feels like an encounter with the Divine.

Perhaps it’s such an experience that enabled shepherds and Magi, each in their own way<sup>2</sup> – to see what the religious insiders and the powerful could not? Nicodemus comes to mind too – seeking out Jesus, *by night*.<sup>3</sup>

When you gaze into the midnight darkness of the Christmas Crib, what do you see? If our gaze into the Crib reveals merely a cute baby – only a historical artefact, just a something outside of ourselves, a tinselly, bauble decoration, or a mere object of sentimental wish-fulfilment – then we are blinded to the magnificent vision of the “light who is coming into the world”.<sup>4</sup>

So tonight’s sacramental vessel, this liturgy – through its poetry, symbols, and ritual actions – gives tangible, bodily expression to the church’s spiritual insight which long predated scientific discovery: that we catch a vision in midnight darkness which *cannot be seen in the ordinary light of day*.

In our time, Hubble telescope images from the far reaches of deep, dark space are astounding us, truly blowing our minds - revealing entire worlds in what we had thought was merely empty darkness. More astonishingly, physicists have been telling us that what can be observed is in fact only about 5 per cent of the totality of the cosmos!

And at the other pole of observable phenomena, depth psychologists suggest that rational consciousness represents only a small proportion of the totality of the objective psyche. The balance – individual and collective unconscious – is perhaps the inner equivalent to physics’ dark matter and dark energy.

Another kind of darkness that at times feels like it might overwhelm us – of which we have been acutely aware in the latter days of Advent – is the immense suffering of the world, the shocking tragedies and killings and state-sanctioned murders, which are now delivered to us instantly via our smartphones and tablets. Just when we seem to have organised our lives so that *we* are in control – a deadly siege, a mass killing, a wayward rubbish truck, a natural disaster, a sudden illness or death – such happenings shatter our tidy illusion. And like Mary in the presence of the angel, we may feel overshadowed.<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, our attempt to live permanently by the false illumination of 21<sup>st</sup> century lights only increases our vulnerability to the very darkness we fear and try so hard to evade. For “to reject darkness is to be blind to the coming of the light, and so our personality is crippled and our souls starve and sicken... [and] there gathers the collective sickness”.<sup>6</sup> We do not seem to realise, for instance, that the apparent ‘success’ of

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:9  
<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:8, Matthew 2:2

<sup>3</sup> John 2:2

<sup>4</sup> John 1:9

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:35

<sup>6</sup> Helen Luke, cited in Joy Ryan-Bloore, *Blueprint for a New World Order: Reflections for Advent and Christmas*, Christchurch NZ, 2014 p72.

turning back the boats – the attempt to keep this particular darkness at bay – is in fact destroying our collective soul.

Darkness is the key to vision. “In the beginning... darkness covered the face of the deep... and God separated the light from the darkness”.<sup>7</sup> “For darkness”, the Psalmist perceived, “is as light to you [O LORD].”<sup>8</sup> “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”.<sup>9</sup> “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot grasp it”.<sup>10</sup> “Our soul yearns for union,” declared Dionysius in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, “with the One who is Darkness beyond Light”.<sup>11</sup> “Unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light”.<sup>12</sup> This truth intuited by countless mystics and teachers down the centuries is now being confirmed by physicists – who even claim that the key to understanding the visible 5 per cent of the cosmos is to be found in the mystery of the 95 per cent which they call dark matter and dark energy!<sup>13</sup> Christ’s descent into hell is perhaps the spiritual insight which accurately predicted this latter-day theory from science.

But science also now tells us that “we are literally bathed in a cosmic sea of light, invisible to us, yet permeating and sustaining every cell of our being, every atom of matter. At the quantum level, all apparently separate aspects of life are connected in one invisible and indivisible whole. All life at the deepest level is essentially One.”<sup>14</sup> So light can be measured with scientific instruments, yes, as the cosmic sea which bathes everything – apart from which nothing in the whole cosmos can exist. John’s spiritual intuition, however, preceded this wonderful scientific knowledge by a couple of thousand years: All things came into being through this Light (Word), and without which there is nothing that can exist.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, since we now know that the human psyche is itself bathed in this same cosmic sea of light upon a vast ocean of darkness, then the Light who is coming into the world in the Christmas Crib can be intuited and adored spiritually, as the birth of the Divine Darkness beyond Light in the ground of the human soul – in the union of all human souls.

While I was reflecting on this great mystery a friend sent me this stunning poem:

The star over Bethlehem  
is the crack  
in the night’s sky  
through which  
light of the Real  
shines  
illuminating  
the divine child  
hidden  
in the manger  
of the human soul.

And not only the human soul. But as St Paul realised, in the whole groaning creation<sup>16</sup> – what the mystics have long known as the one world soul.

Thus the hidden Mystery now revealed in the deep and dazzling dark light of the Crib, that light and darkness and one-ness are of a single piece – all things came into being through a cosmic sea of Light bathed in an ocean of Darkness! This is what our tradition understands as mystical union in God attained by sharing Christ consciousness – which intuition is at the heart of the Eucharist we share at the Altar of Christ.

By the dazzling Light of tonight’s feast, then – illuminated by the cosmic sacramental Light of Christ’s Body and Blood offered to all at the Altar – let us not fear the darkness but find our meaning and identity and one-ness in its mystery. And let us pray that, with Mary, we may also consent<sup>17</sup> to being bearers of the eternal Word of Love – Sons and Daughters of God<sup>18</sup> bathed in the one sea of cosmic Love in an ocean of dazzling Darkness, completing, each in our own uniqueness, the dawning evolution of what was initially revealed to us by the Incarnation in Christ, the revealing of the Mystery hidden in ages of darkness, but now being revealed in all flesh.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:2,4

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 139:12

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 9:2

<sup>10</sup> John 1:5,9

<sup>11</sup> Attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius, cited in Ursula King, **Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies Throughout the Ages**, London: Routledge, 2001, p56.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Beuchner, ‘The Word Became Flesh’, cited at <http://frederickbeuchner.com/content/christmas-0>

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Freese, **The Cosmic Cocktail: Three Parts Dark Matter**, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014

<sup>14</sup> Ann Baring, **The Dream of the Cosmos: A Quest for the Soul**, Dorset: Archive Publishing, 2013, p532

<sup>15</sup> John 1:3

<sup>16</sup> Romans 8:22

<sup>17</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Pannikar, cited in Ilia Delio, **Christ in Evolution**, New York: Orbis, 2008, p11.