

Sermon 27 November 2016 – Sarah Thomas

Romans 13:11-14 and Matthew 24:26-44. Light and Dark

Advent is a time for reflection, a time when we lift up the stone that we use to keep a lid on our lives, to see what lurks underneath in the darkness. It can be hard to find time and space to reflect during what is often such a hectic time of lists, preparation and never enough time to be ready for Christmas. But if we can carve out time for reflection, we can use it to look for the ways in which we are crowding out the light of Christ in our lives. We can then reach Christmas more able to reflect Christ's light back into the world.

Light, true light. Not candles, however wonderfully scented, not sparkling fairy lights, not the blinking lights favoured by cyclists, nor the harsh glow from a computer screen, but the light of Christ.

Genesis describes God creating the light and separating dark from light. John's gospel describes the light shining in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. Isaiah speaks of people walking in darkness who have seen a great light.

Both Paul and Jesus remind us that our lives are short. In the verses just before the ones we have from Romans, Paul reminded his readers that the most important commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. He then goes on to warn his readers to wake up. To put away the things of night and to live in the daylight.

And what are the things of night that he warns us about? It's not about darkness itself, after all we need darkness for our health. It's the time when we sleep, which brings recovery and recuperation.

No, it's about the deeds of darkness. The things we do that we wish others didn't know about, or that we hide from others in our desire to be known to be loving, or the things we try to convince ourselves that we won't do again, knowing that we most likely will.

Generally, they will be actions that hurt others as much as they hurt ourselves.

Sometimes those things are done because we don't think about others, we want to have our own way too much of the time, or we don't wish to see another's viewpoint, or have become argumentative, fallen into a pattern which we find hard to break.

Sometimes they are a response to an inability to deal with dark emotions, of loss, of sadness, of failure. Instead of embracing those emotions and learning to bear them, we fill them up with artificial lights, drugs, alcohol, shopping, hours of TV or being on line, or things that prevent reflection.

Some of us are afraid of looking at those dark emotions, it seems overwhelming and we continue to light those artificial lights.

But is that darkness hostile? Are those dark emotions somehow a sign that God is no longer with us? Or rather do we need to learn to walk in the darkness, so that we don't have need of the artificial lights?

Where darkness feels like we have become spiritually blind and when we feel that faith/belief disappears or the certainties we once knew become less certain, then we may need time in darkness to find a new language or new definitions to fit our old language of faith. In time, the sense of God will return. For example I have found that the language of 'knowing God' doesn't work anymore –

Pete Rollins describes this as in the same way that as a baby doesn't know its mother, it experiences its mother's love, so we do not know God, but we experience his love.

Perhaps we need to have the courage to let darkness be a place where we let God speak to us in the same way that the Old Testament describes God speaking to his people during times of darkness. So many amazing things happened in the Bible during darkness. God showed Abraham the stars and promised that he would have as many descendants; Jacob wrestled with an angel at night, Joseph's dreams were at night, Manna fell from heaven during the wilderness years in Exodus. And God created darkness during the day, when he needed to speak to his people, he did so while hidden from sight by clouds. And so, when we most feel at a loss, in darkness, at our most vulnerable, then maybe that is the time when God is protecting us the most? And we needn't look for those artificial lights that cover up the deeds of darkness.

If we do not try to find artificial lights, then in time, the light of Christ will find its' way through our darkness and we will not simply be restored, we will be transformed.

There's a wonderful 12 century icon in the museum in St Katherine's monastery in Sinai. It shows the annunciation – when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will be the mother of God's child – and there is a line of light from heaven that lands on Mary.

<https://goo.gl/images/RMVBMN>

Half way down that line there is a wonderful splash of light. It's an optical illusion. If you stand and look at it from one direction there seems to be bird inside the splash, from another, it's looks like a chalice. Symbols of the Holy Spirit and of the blood of Christ given for us. That light can land on us too.

Leonard Cohen wrote the words: 'There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'.

We are cracked. We not smooth or perfect. We spend our days in Jesus words: in eating and drinking, in marrying and giving in marriage. In other words, all the normal things that fill up our waking hours. We do not turn our thoughts to God.

But because we are cracked, then that is how the light of Christ gets into us, shining its light around our dark corners. And if we let it become the replacement for the artificial lights we otherwise use, then the deeds of darkness of which we are ashamed and which hurt others, will be overcome.

Paul calls that putting on the armour of light. Others call it putting on Christ. And it is not a one-off thing, it has to be a regular conscious decision. The light gets in through the cracks in our lives and hopefully shines back out through those self-same cracks, to be a light to our path through life. Maybe sometimes, or more often, our path is lit by the light shining out of other people.

This advent time, even if time is hard to come by, we can use incidental spaces to reflect on our darkness. When washing up, ironing, walking the dog, whatever you do that is relatively mindless. We can invite God to be with us in our darkness and to enable us to do away with the artificial lights we use to disperse the darkness and to be transformed with the light of Christ instead.

Amen