

Lent sermon series for St Peter's, Limpsfield
2nd Sunday of Lent, 8th March 2020

**A journey through our humanity,
with Jesus**

Rev James Percival

Three: **Darkness** *Nicodemus, a Pharisee*
 John 3:1-17

There are many interesting things to notice in this mysterious and famous encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee. But I want to reflect today on this particular one: that Nicodemus came to be Jesus 'by night.' It's dark. Nicodemus is an undercover agent.

In the bible, God is not only to be found in light, but also, often, in darkness, even 'thick darkness' (for example, Exodus 20:21; Deuteronomy 5:22).

As Christians, our hope is in Christ crucified and risen. We are Easter people, and Alleluia is our song. But this brings a risk with it - especially in these anxious and driven times for the Church of England in our country, full of slogans and initiatives to turn around numerical decline - this brings a risk that we are not willing to allow space for the mystery and the darkness.

For this reason, I am never very pleased - though try to be polite - to be cheerily greeted by others in Holy Week with 'Happy Easter!'. No it isn't, I would like to growl back -

we're not there yet! Though Christian traditions have interpreted Jesus' saving work on the cross in different ways, for many of us Good Friday is a dark day, the darkest. God-with-us is casually and brutally put to death by human pride and fear and foolishness, in which I am afraid I have a part too, however much I want to be always with the goodies and the faithful women.

Because the hope of Easter is not in the picture, yet. It is just dark. And in our lives, and in our faith, we need to live with the darkness without rushing to impose the dawn - not only through our Easter hope, but through our reluctance to stay with the darkness. That's why I say that if you miss out on some experience of Good Friday in preparation for Easter, then you are not only cheating, but you are missing the full depth and power of it.

I expect that we can each recall experiences of darkness in our lives. One example for me, just over five years ago, was the death of my friend from school, Louise. She was an inspiration to me as a Christian, and a much-loved GP in East London. She took her own life in the midst of severe mental illness.

We might say that she was ill and her death spared her further suffering with bi-polar disorder. We might give thanks for the Louise Tebboth Foundation set up in her memory to support the mental wellbeing of medical practitioners and doctors' families bereaved by suicide.

But her illness was episodic rather than chronic; and the good that people have done in response to her death is marvellous, but does not justify or redeem it.

For me her loss is just dark and I don't think I will ever be reconciled to it, and in a sense I don't want to be. Whatever our heavenly hope, the earth is poorer without her. To think of Louise's death for me is to feel the shiver and shudder of the dementors swirling around, sucking out life and light and hope. In the brilliant panoply of J K Rowling's characters in *Harry Potter*, they are right up there, because we can all recognise them, can't we?

As a church, I want us to be able to sit with people in darkness - as I know the body of Christ here has done many times over the years, and continues to do - without trying to pretend it is other than dark. And our story, our Christian faith, is big enough to bear this, because on Good Friday, Jesus dies, and it is just dark.

Allowing those spaces, in my experience, also makes our church and our faith more real and possible for people on the edge or outside it. I had a strange and wonderful experience in the darkness last night on a late night walk with Polly dog around the long block (managing yet again not to fall into a hole in Bluehouse Lane, though I feel sure it is going to happen soon).

As I came up Snatts Hill, I heard loud and raucous singing around the corner, followed by the smash of a bottle. I gathered Polly close - she is not really a guard dog! - and cautiously continued.

There I met a young man who was quite drunk having celebrated getting an internship which would cover his university fees. He was looking forward to the rest of his life and I initially encouraged him to get out of the road so that his life continued tomorrow. We began talking and he asked me what I did and I told him I was the vicar in Limpsfield. He used to go to church and is now agnostic, he said. I said that I found being a Christian also had times of darkness and doubt, and questions help us to grow in faith. And he said that he had more respect for the church now. And even picked up the smashed bottle!

So I think there is treasure to be found and shared in being real and open rather than anxious or wearing the strained smile of false jollity, or avoiding the darkness when it comes.

Here is a poignant song lyric by John Bell of the Iona Community, derived from a short poem by Pat Bennett, in which the hard things in life are recognised as experiences we need to live through rather than avoid:

*In this darkness
I do not ask to walk by light;
But to feel the touch of your hand
And understand that sight is not seeing.*

*In this silence
I do not ask to hear your voice;
But to sense your Spirit breathe
And so bequeath my care to your keeping.*

*In unknowing
I do not ask for certain space;
But for grace to comprehend
That neither you nor I are diminished.*

*In this death,
I do not ask to forfeit pain,
But to gain the strength to love
Through loss, and cross the bridge of waiting.*

Though it is a basic human feeling, isn't it, to be afraid of the dark, the other thing about the darkness - as for Nicodemus - is that it can help us to see more clearly. This is true in life, and in the strange topsy-turviness of our Christian faith. As a quite different song lyric put it, this time from Savatage, the American heavy metal band, in their song, *When the crowds are gone*. Now, like me, you may think that heavy metal is generally an incomprehensible din - but when the noise quietsens there can be some really beautiful and powerful moments, like the ending of this song:

*And the lights
Turn them off my friend
And the ghosts
Well just let them in
Cause in the dark
It's easier to see*

If we can at times, be willing to abide in the darkness of the tragedies in our lives, and to be with others going through theirs without trying to mend them then and there; in being

real, and allowing the darkness to be fully dark; in letting the cross be dark and acknowledging our desolation and our need -

then the way is open again for us - in God's time, not ours - like Nicodemus, to take small steps of trust and hope. We find Nicodemus again in John's gospel, reminding his Pharisee colleagues in the Sanhedrin that the law requires a person be heard before being judged (John 7:50-51); and then finally after the crucifixion, Nicodemus provides the embalming spices for Jesus' body, and assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body for burial (John 19:39).

And we too can embrace - however we can - God's invitation to each one of us to join in with the light that no darkness can finally quench. As our gospel today concludes, with perhaps the most famous bible verse of all:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17).

So as we bring our darkneses to the darkness of the cross, may we find our trust and hope in the love of God renewed there - even when we can't see it or feel it ourselves.

Amen.