

The day I started thinking about this talk, winter suddenly arrived and that day it hardly got light at all. As a result, all my get-up-and-go just got-up-and-left. The next day was brilliantly light and I felt so full of life and attacked my chores with such enthusiasm I blew the vacuum cleaner up! Life and light are inextricably linked. As the days get darker, the trees lose their leaves, many plants die down – it's as if life is disappearing with the light – then the opposite happens in the spring as the light returns.

At creation, the first thing mentioned is light and John tells us that Jesus Christ was with God in the beginning; through him all things were made. “in him was life and that **life** was the **light** of men.” But as we all know, mankind wanted to go its own way, do its own thing, know better than God – and the result was darkness.

In the BCP evening service there is a prayer which seems strange these days with our brightly lit homes: Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; When we say this prayer at the 6.30 service, I picture people in their medieval clothes in a church lit only by a few candles and **feel** their apprehension as the darkness outside gets thicker and colder.

Why is there such a fear of the dark?

1. In some ways it is psychological. In the dark the familiar becomes unfamiliar (what is that big shadow over there) We're afraid of what we're not sure of – and I don't just mean the threatening shape which turns out to be the dressing gown hanging from the door. Then there are situations we don't really understand. These can feel threatening too. What do we say, when we finally understand? “Oh, I see!” - and that implies a clearing away of the darkness inside our heads!.
2. Sometimes the dark can actually be dangerous. We don't see the dangers we normally avoid, like holes in the footpath, furniture in the way. Anyone who is blind or partially sighted knows how they live with constant danger like this. There's nothing sinister about it – it's just common sense that if we don't see danger, we can't avoid it. And that can apply to the day to day decisions we have to make too.

Then there's the darkness that's associated with lack of hope. People who have been through a terrible time talk of wanting there to be light at the end of the tunnel. So many people live in the darkness of despair

4 Sometimes the darkness inside our heads comes from an unwillingness to understand. Or forgive. Or from anger. Or from just being plain grumpy and bad-tempered. You can see how that sort of darkness is associated with sin.

5 Then there is an even more obvious connection between darkness and evil when people deliberately use the cover of darkness to steal, threaten or attack

To change the mood completely, let me tell you a joke that was on the radio recently: a sweet-natured but rather lonely man was tending his garden when he heard singing coming from one of the plants. Mystified, he searched the flower bed, wondering if he was going to find a fairy! Eventually he heard a voice telling him to look under the flowers and there he saw a centipede – a centipede who could sing and talk. He was so taken by this little creature that he took it indoors, made a lovely little house for it with lots of glass so they could see each other, talk to each other and keep each other company.

One day the man thought the centipede must be getting a bit fed up with being in one place and having no exercise, so he thought he'd take him out. "Let's go for a walk," he called to the centipede. "We'll have a nice stroll and finish up at the pub."

There didn't seem to be much reaction so after a bit he called out again: "Come on, we'll go for a walk and go to the pub." There was no reply from the talking centipede so, wondering if he'd gone deaf, the man shouted this time: "Come on, let's go for a walk and then go to the pub." "I heard you the first time" said a little voice, "I'm just putting my shoes on."

That's what it must have been like for the people of God who had waited so long for the promised Messiah. **Why** was God waiting so long. Isaiah had proclaimed the word of God: "Comfort, comfort my people" and then "He tends his flock like a shepherd." But hundreds of years had passed. No comfort, no shepherd. Yes, they'd returned from exile in Babylon but now they lived under the harsh and hated rule of the Romans. What had happened to the light of hope? What had become of the promise that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light?"

Into that long, dark night strode a man shouting Isaiah's words: "Make straight the way of the Lord." People came to him to be baptised but – it wasn't about him and he never made it about him. He was there to witness to the light. "He himself was not the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."

And this was what the people had waited for for so long – this was what had been promised by Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned."

John's job was to make people face up to the darkness in their lives: in their lack of understanding, in their sin, in their giving up on God. They needed to recognise the darkness in order to want to turn to the light.

At this time of year, with our advent candles burning in the darkness, we prepare to celebrate the ushering-in of **God's kingdom** of light, of truth, of holiness, of hope when the birth of a tiny baby caused the sky to be a mass of light with angels singing God's praises for his merciful gift to his people walking in darkness. And as we remember that event, we look forward to the time when that kingdom will come so completely that, as it says in Revelation, "the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light."

The lamb. Jesus shared human experience to the full as he suffered and died on the cross -suffering, pain and death are part of what it is to be human. But sin doesn't have to be: Jesus, who never sinned, took our sin and dealt with it completely, banishing it to the outer darkness, so that when we are united with him, we share in that state of being perfectly free from sin and we shine as children of the light, because it is his light.

Sin is still out there, but it has lost its power – it has no power over us – unless we turn that light off. How do we do that? We push Jesus out, stop listening to him, stop looking at him. But that forgiveness, that cleansing from sin is always there for us to embrace when we turn back to him. And we only do that when we recognise the darkness we've been in, regret it and want to return to the light.

Paul invited the Philippians – and us – to become "blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe, as you hold out the word of life." We'll only shine like stars if we remain in his light – the true light.

Like John the Baptist, we've been given a job – it's to witness to the light.. And how do we do that?

We were given the clues in the Epistle today: keep praising God (that way you look at **him** and not at the darkness – whatever form that is taking); keep thanking him, do good to one another and do nothing that will put out the Spirit's blaze – and if that sounds hard, we only have to choose to reflect the light of Christ. It's all about him – he is the true light.