

**A Sermon preached by The Right Reverend Robert Atwell,
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Sunday 1st February 2009

The darkness of God

Isaiah 45. 15-21

1 John 1. 5-10

Darkness has never enjoyed a good press. When I was a child my mother used to leave a night-light burning in a saucer of water on the window sill in my bedroom at night. Childhood fears and the threat of the unknown and unseen conspire to feed the identification of darkness with the forces of chaos and evil in our collective unconscious.

It is a perception reflected in the Bible. From page one, as it were, we are told that with darkness upon the face of the deep God said, 'Let there be light'. In our prayers at Evensong we beseech God to 'lighten our darkness'. Darkness seems more than a mere absence of light: it seems to have a force and personality of its own.

The reason why this language resonates so strongly with us is because of all our senses it is sight to which we give pride of place in the hierarchy of values. Losing our sight is something we all dread. It's no accident that a common phrase for 'I understand' is 'I see'. We talk about 'being kept in the dark' and 'seeing the light'. We call a foolish act 'a leap in the dark', and speak of 'insight' and 'shedding light on a problem'.

We represent the so-called 'Dark Ages' as a period of chaos following the disintegration of Roman civilization, and in the history of ideas we describe the way pre-scientific beliefs about the origins of the universe were challenged by rational inquiry during the eighteenth century as 'The Enlightenment' – as if everything that went before it was intellectually shabby.

By familiar association light has come to represent truth and progress, whereas darkness is seen as ignorance and despair, and is often portrayed as evil. But is this traditional dichotomy, with its rejection of darkness, sustainable?

In the history of art the discovery of shadow was hugely significant. It marked the transition from flat two-dimensional representations into painting that exhibited a quality of depth and vibrancy. Do we need to make a similar transition and rehabilitate shadow and darkness into our spiritual self-understanding, and give positive value to the 'dark times' of our lives?

'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.'

says Eliot in his poem 'East Coker'. Is he right?

The Christian tradition is more nuanced than one might suppose. On the one hand we learn from St John that 'God is light, and that in God there is no darkness at all.' (1 John 1.5) On the other hand in Isaiah we encounter the statement, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself'. (Isaiah 45.15) And then there are those disturbing words put into the mouth of one of Job's comforters: 'Blessed are those whom the Lord corrects; therefore never despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he who wounds, is he who soothes the sore; and the hand that hurts is the hand that heals.' (Job 5.17)

Is God maverick, one minute playing the nurse soothing us better and the next minute hurting us? And what are we to make of that other statement in Isaiah? 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.' (Isaiah 45.7) Is God also in the darkness?

For the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan the answer was unmistakably yes.

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness;

For Vaughan though the darkness of God may be dazzling, it still feels warm, enfolding, womb-like. For others, however, the darkness is decidedly cold and bleak, an experience of spiritual estrangement and dislocation, an experience not of presence but of absence.

When I was chaplain here way back in the 1980s it was my privilege to work alongside the then Dean of Chapel, John Robinson. Better known as Bishop of Woolwich and for his controversial book published in the 1960s, *Honest to God*, John

was in fact a distinguished New Testament scholar. In preparation for retirement he and his wife bought a house in the Yorkshire Dales as a result of which he found himself in the vacations pastor to the dispersed communities living in Littondale.

Not long after conducting the funeral of a young girl from the next village who had died of leukaemia, John was himself diagnosed with inoperable cancer of the pancreas and given six months to live. I shall never forget the atmosphere here in chapel as he preached his last sermon. He began it with these words:

'When I was last preaching here it was Trinity Sunday, and I knew I was going into Addenbrooke's the next day for an operation, which turned out to reveal an inoperable cancer... Two years ago I found myself having to speak at the funeral of a 16 year-old girl in our Yorkshire dale. I said stumbingly that God was to be found in the cancer as much as in the sunset. That I firmly believed, but it was an intellectual statement. Now I have had to ask if I can say it of myself, which is a much greater test.'

John set himself the task of learning from cancer and his struggle became a commentary on Isaiah's words, 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.' As he embraced the darkness and an unknown future, he discovered that God was there waiting to be encountered.

For all of us there is resistance to embracing the darkness and the unknown. The darkness does not merely dazzle, it scares us. We find it difficult to entrust ourselves to it, let alone believe that God is there, awaiting us with outstretched hands which are themselves wounded. The first obstacle we have to overcome is our fear.

It is a happy coincidence that the phrase 'Fear not' occurs precisely three hundred and sixty-five times in the Bible, once for each day of the year. But it would be naïve to say, 'Fear not. Trust God and God will ensure that none of the things you fear will ever happen to you.' More realistically, we should say, 'Fear not. The things of which you are frightened are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of because God is with you.'

We reduce the possibilities for encounter with God if we locate God only in the light and eschew the darkness. God must be Lord

of the darkness as well as the light, just as he is Lord of the desert as well as the oasis.

One final thought. At funerals it is customary to recite Psalm 23 with its comforting words, 'Yea, though I walk through the shadow of death I fear no evil. For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.' People seek and find reassurance in these words.

But as a rabbi once pointed out to me, the Hebrew text says not 'if' we travel through dark valleys, but 'when'. The presupposition is that we will encounter darkness: we will encounter difficulty in life. For the Christian there is both consolation and challenge in the voice of crucified Christ as he cries, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' There is no darkness that God does not inhabit and illumine.

What gives me the courage to persevere in life is not the security of a known future, but the certainty of that divine companionship which will not let us go. It is more powerful than anything that the future can throw at us. And to that God, the author of both light and darkness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all glory for time and for eternity.

+ Robert Atwell