

December 24, 2012

Christmas Eve

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.

Over and over we who are the Church, the people of God, the first fruits of the new humanity and renewed creation, find ourselves proclaiming the incredible truth that light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot comprehend, surround, snuff out or inhabit the light. We bear witness in the face of death that life wins. We point to the places where we can see light, however ambient, in the darkest hours of the night saying that sin and degradation and isolation are not the last word. The last word is still Love.

Some of us tend to see the world as fundamentally dark. We have been told of the basic depravity of humanity, the reality of our sinful natures beginning with Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, we have heard of the atrocities people have committed in history, often in the name of religion, and we have seen on our televisions the carnage brought about by wars and insanity in our own day and time. For Christians who see the world through such a lens, the problem is sin, and Jesus is the answer. Christmas is the beginning of the story that will be unveiled as the pivotal point in human history bringing forgiveness to those who give their hearts over to God, claim the present that is lying in the manger waiting for us to unswaddle, and live forever in that light that will only be fully revealed in heaven. God provides a mechanical solution to the problems of history in Jesus' ultimate death on the cross. It is the bloodshed that is effective, with the resurrection almost an afterthought or reward for a 'job well done'. Christmas is just the beginning, a winter rose blooming before the fullness of life that is to come in the spring.

For many of us, such thinking was the doorframe of the front door through which we walked into a life of faith. It was all about guilt and forgiveness, certainly part of what the babe in the manger will address, but perhaps this view is fundamentally skewed or somehow 'off kilter'. That was the theology I was given or taught when I first came to conscious or chosen faith. Some of my friends from those days became and remain rather hard line as though they are afraid that if they waver, they will be letting God down or becoming apostate or something. More of my friends from those days have rejected the faith altogether. For them, once the cracks started appearing in the closed rationalistic system, then faith ceased to make sense. You know what I mean: this faith is the kind where all questions are answered from within the system.

'Why is my friend not being healed when I pray?'

'Clearly because you don't have enough faith.'

'Does God really require bloodshed in order to offer forgiveness?'

'Yes. Because God cannot abide sin and so you would have to be killed if baby Jesus wasn't born so that he could die in your place. It's all part of God's plan.'

For some of my friends there might have been a period of compromise, of slightly shifting positions, but in the end, darkness will usually win. This stuff is incredible nonsense and a thinking person will eventually say that evil is simply too present and the God of this world cannot overcome or comprehend or defeat the darkness. The theological house of cards comes down faster than the walls of Jericho and faith flees out of the window.

Brothers and sisters, we have a choice about how we will see the world. By some extraordinary grace I was granted a different way when those cracks began appearing in the theology I had been taught. I was granted a different way of reading the story and seeing the world, the way of the Prologue to John's gospel, the way of light. I came to this country as an undergraduate and was there introduced to what seemed to me to be a large Episcopal parish. I had known dreary village churches and vibrant para-church evangelical ministries, but never a vibrant congregation. Suddenly here I was hearing decent sermons and wonderful music among people of all ages who appeared to care for each other and care enough to fight when they needed to without breaking apart. Those were the days of Prayer Book revision and the ordination of women and there were plenty of arguments to be had. In retrospect I'm sure there must have been people who found it more important to believe themselves right than to be in relationship with each other. (To this day I will often ask couples preparing for marriage to answer the fundamental question of themselves 'would you rather be right or would you rather be related?') But at that time from my access and perspective, what I saw was God working in and through the Christian Community in ways I had never before experienced. I began to see the world as defined not by darkness, but defined by light; defined not by original sin but by original blessing, the memory of Eden before the fall; the world defined not by death but by love.

When we begin to grasp the truth that the darkness comprehended not the light that came into the world, then Christmas is not a fairy tale of mere footnote to the real story of the cross of Jesus. Instead incarnation becomes essential to the story that we celebrate in the birth of Jesus. It is about the author of our salvation inhabiting the characters of the human story in the most complete way imaginable. The darkness cannot comprehend divine life and light inhabiting ours. Darkness comprehended it not either in the sense of understanding light, or in the sense of containing or surrounding that light. We are left with a choice, sometimes a hard choice, to look for the light. From the perspective of original blessing, a birth can take place in the midst of unimaginable horrors and what we see is the miracle and what we do is proclaim God's love in the midst of a sinful and broken world nonetheless. We are not defeated by the reality of evil, because we know the power and meaning and purpose that we find in the reality of Love.

Tonight we proclaim the Love of God for all of humanity, for you and for me. We proclaim the possibility of integrity in a broken world. We proclaim that darkness is not what defines us, but light. We proclaim that we are comprehended: understood and surrounded by the love of God, even and perhaps especially when darkness seems to hold sway in and around us.

If you do not see the light or if you hear the story of this night as a sop to children, a fairly tale or sentimental fable, then I invite you to consider joining us in following the Prince of Peace and allowing your vision to be shaped by and towards what really matters. As you choose light and life, so you will begin to find God trustworthy, and so you will know the renewal and deepening of real love in your life. If you want to begin practicing making the choices of faith, you can accept the invitation to commune among the people of God around God's table this night, reaching out your hands with the faithful across the world and down the ages and saying 'YES'. YES, because *the light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.*