

“Light for our darkness”

The sermon given by the Archbishop of Wales, the Most Rev. Dr. Barry Morgan, in the week he steps down as the longest serving Archbishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion, reflects on navigating the areas of light and darkness in our lives.

I once remember, as a curate, trying to explain the significance of the person of Jesus to a church full of children. Dredging up all the educational insights I had ever been given, I told them the story of Capt Lawrence Oates, one of the people who accompanied Scott to the South Pole, only to discover that they had been beaten in the attempt by a Norwegian team.

Full of disappointment, they began their journey home through snow and wind and temperatures far below zero. There were five originally on the expedition but one had died – and the remaining four were not able to travel quickly because in addition to the weather, one of the company, Lawrence Oates, was suffering from severe frostbite.

Oates, realising that they would never reach the depot where they had left food and fuel, going at his slow pace, tried to persuade his companions to leave him. They refused. One night when there was a raging blizzard outside, Oates crept out of his tent, never to be seen again. He gave up his life in order that others might have a chance to live.

And then having told the children that story about sacrifice, I used it to talk about the sacrifice of Jesus and the way He gave His life in the service of God and His fellow human beings.

But of course the sacrifice of Jesus is different from the sacrifice of Oates or any other human being who lays down his life for his friends noble as that is, because of who Jesus was and is.

What Christians claim about Jesus is that in Him God was at work in a unique way – that the action of Jesus was the action of God and that therefore any human parallels can only work up to a point. God was at work in the life and death of Jesus in a way that He has not been and is not at work in the life of any other human being and in as full a way as it is possible for God to be at work in a human life. God in Jesus Christ has shared our humanity and become one of us. He is the human face of God and He reveals to us God’s nature and essence.

In the words of Simeon, just read to us from the Gospel of Luke, “Jesus is a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of His people Israel”. Or as the Gospel of John says “He is the light of the world”. But if that is really the case, why does Simeon go on to say that Jesus will cause some to fall and others to rise? But is not that what happens when people and objects are exposed to light? Light shows things as they really are – the dirt and the dust are made visible. So too the light and goodness of Jesus showed up and shows up the darkness of those who did not and do not want to live in His light.

The artist John Piper captures it all in one of the windows at Coventry Cathedral, where he portrays Jesus as light breaking into the world. Whilst the periphery of the stained glass window is dark, the central figure, Jesus, is portrayed in beautifully clear and dazzling stained glass but the darkness around the edges remains.

How then is Jesus God’s light to our world? It is because of His compassion and acceptance of all kinds of people in the gospels since He believed compassion was God’s defining characteristic towards humanity. Why should anyone object to that? It was because the religious authorities of His time regarded God’s chief characteristic as holiness, based on the Book of Leviticus, which said people should reflect God’s holiness, and so it was their task to protect that holiness.

Holiness meant having nothing to do with anything that was regarded as unclean or impure. Tax collectors were to be avoided because they did so on behalf of a foreign power – seen as impure. People who were sick were seen as unclean because the terribly twisted common belief was that their wrongdoing was responsible for their sickness. The poor were regarded as impure because wealth was seen as a blessing from God. Men were [apparently] seen as more pure than women because of menstruation and child-bearing.

Jesus turned this system on its head by touching and mixing with all those regarded as impure and unclean – lepers and haemorrhaging women, tax collectors and sinners. He ate with all kinds of people, women included, where sharing a meal was regarded as a sign of acceptance and welcome. He told stories such as the Good Samaritan that were critical of the purity system. The priest and Levite ignored the injured man because contact with death or illness was seen as a source of impurity, whereas the Samaritan, regarded by Jewish society as belonging to an impure race acted compassionately towards the man on the Jericho road.

So too the father of the prodigal runs out to greet his son – something no Jewish father would have done because the son had put himself beyond respectable society by demanding his share of his inheritance before his father's death, had squandered it all in riotous living and ended up looking after pigs so making himself impure for a multiplicity of reasons. None of that mattered, Jesus said, to a God whose nature was that of forgiveness and mercy.

The choir then sang the Stanford Nunc Dimittis in C

Those words of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis, to a setting by Stanford, expressed his joy at seeing the Messiah, whose light still shines in every darkness.

Given the often-subversive nature of God's redeeming love, no wonder Jesus made enemies amongst those with a vested interest in defending the status quo. The poor, the marginalised, and the excluded on the other hand, rejoiced in His acceptance of them.

We, too, live in a world where some show hatred towards those who do not live pure lives as defined by them. And this lack of tolerance of anyone who departs even slightly from the established norms seems in danger of becoming more rather than less fashionable as a way of thinking, as intolerance is met with further intolerance, hatred with hatred, and fear with ever deepening fear.

But the Epistle of John says that in Jesus, as in God, there is no darkness at all “for He is full of compassion and mercy and of great goodness because He is the father of light”. But it is also possible to believe in a compassionate God whilst failing to act compassionately ourselves. It is all too easy to hurry past the homeless on our street corners without a second glance or to shut our ears to pleas for money to help the hungry or refugees on the grounds that there are too many of them. It is easy to choose darkness rather than light without really realising it.

The truth is that even though at times we may slip into darkness and do things of which we are later ashamed, or fail to do things we know we ought to do, we know deep down that it is light and compassion that run with the grain of the universe because the stories that really touch our hearts are not stories of brutal killings, racial abuse or our inhumanity to one another.

Rather they are stories of love, forgiveness and compassion – a mother who forgives her son's killer; a person who saves a stranger from the raging sea; a simple hug or a meal left on the doorstep for someone who has been bereaved; money given to relieve hunger or a bed offered to a refugee, and quiet unheralded acts of compassion towards the homeless shown by workers in one shop over Christmas in the city of Llandaff, where I live, who clothed and fed someone sleeping in their doorway, when others would have called the police to have him removed.

And we are touched because we know in the end that those are the values that really matter and the resurrection of Jesus, who mixed with so-called undesirables and sinners, offering them the hand of friendship, is actually God's endorsement that this is the only way to live and love because they are the values of His kingdom and will ultimately win out.