

## Sermon for 11 December 2016

It's a beautiful bright morning now, but how early it gets dark, how long are the dark evenings! We know it's going to be like that at this time of year, we completely expect it, yet somehow it still takes us by surprise how much we feel the darkness. We complain at how busy we get preparing for Christmas, yet those preparations, and the anticipation of Christmas, including the celebration of Christmas prior to the day itself, actually provide us with a welcome distraction from the pervasive gloom of long nights.

But there are other ways for it to be dark than for the part of the earth's surface we happen to live on to be tilted away from the sun. There are very many ways in which we can feel ourselves to be in a dark place: illness, bereavement, redundancy, retirement, the illness or other dark place of someone close to us, depression, are just some examples. The darkness can be communal as well as individual: with the news of the closure of a place of work, or place of meeting together such as a pub or club, a collective gloom can descend.

When we are in a dark place, for whatever reason, we can lose a sense of hope. We may begin to doubt God's love for us, and his purpose for our lives. We may try and find consolation in some kind of activity – I've already mentioned how Christmas preparations help to distract us from the darkness of this time of year – but this has a tendency to mask the doubt and fear rather than lead us out of it. How do we move forward into faith, hope and indeed love?

In our Gospel passage today we find John the Baptist in prison. Prisons are dark places, even if, as is often the case with modern prisons, they are brightly lit to discourage crime. They are often places of violence and abuse. Even more, they are places of hopelessness and despair. There is little to do that is purposeful or fulfilling. It is good for us in our busy lives outside prison to set aside time for prayer and meditation. But in prisons there can be too much time to mull over things, to dwell on guilt or a desire for revenge. Small problems can grow in the prisoner's mind out of all proportion to their real importance. Prison ward-

ers have to be on constant guard against suicide.

In chapter 3 of Matthew's Gospel we find John the Baptist proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". He is not in what any of us I guess would call a comfortable situation – he is in the wilderness, wearing clothing made of itchy camels' hair and eating wild honey – which has to be collected from wild, stinging bees – and locusts, which I'm sure are very nutritious but hardly steak and chips. For all that, he is free: free to preach, free to fulfil his destiny as "The voice of one crying...."Prepare the way of the Lord"...". When Jesus comes to John for baptism, John, who is, after all, Jesus' cousin, recognises Jesus as being the one he is, the Lord whose coming John's preaching is preparing the people of Israel for. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

So in his freedom, in his fulfilment of his calling, John recognises Jesus as the sinless Son of God. But if we scroll on to today's Gospel reading, we find John cooped up in prison, and having doubts. It doesn't seem to help, by the way, that John is in prison for all the best reasons, that is to say, that he has spoken out against King Herod the Tetrarch's immorality – that's important, because if John the Baptist can have doubts about Jesus while in prison, I'm sure persecuted Christians today have similar doubts and we need to pray for them in their vulnerability to doubt and despair.

Anyway, back to John: John sends a message to Jesus via his disciples – at least some people have been able to visit him in prison – asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for another?" Jesus' response is gentle. If he had said something like "yes, I am indeed the Messiah, don't you remember you recognised me at the Jordan?" it could have been taken by John as a condemnation of his doubt. By saying "Go and tell John you hear and see", together with a list of things he has done in fulfilment of the Scripture's expectation of what the Messiah is to do, he makes his identity clear without passing judgement on John's doubts. This is then followed by a very positive appraisal of John's character and role.

We don't know if John's faith in Jesus as the Messiah was restored. But the assumption is that it was. In chapter 14 is recorded the gory story of John's beheading, and although the Bible is again silent about John's faith in Jesus at this point, the Christian church has always honoured John as a martyr, someone who paid the ultimate price for his faith.

So, what can we learn from this?

Firstly, we should surely be encouraged by the fact that, if as great a witness to God's love in Jesus as John the Baptist had doubts while in prison, we shouldn't be surprised if we entertain doubts when we're in a dark place ourselves. And isn't Jesus' cry of dereliction from the Cross, "why, oh why have you forsaken me" a cry of doubt and despair in the Father's love? Not all of you may agree with that interpretation, but certainly Jesus is not judgemental towards us in our dark times and in the doubts that are likely to accompany those times. Rather, he draws alongside us, gently encouraging us to rediscover faith in him. For he has been in a dark place – after all, isn't that not only what the Cross is about but the incarnation too, "a light shining in the darkness"?

Secondly, we need to draw alongside *others* in *their* times of doubt, not condemning but again encouraging the restoration of faith. In both our own dark times and in the dark times of others we need to be patient. Now patience is not something that comes naturally to me. I want to know the answer to things in life straight away, I want a blazing light to show me the way. I don't like having to wait in the darkness. I think I'd be horrible to live with if, for example, I needed an operation and was told I couldn't have it for – well I was going to say six months but, actually, call that six minutes!

In another of today's Bible readings, the reading from the letter of James, we are told in no uncertain terms, "Be patient"! The context is what James calls "the coming of the Lord". The early church was troubled, as it still is, by the slowness of Jesus' return to be our judge. But, like the farmer waiting for the rain to water his crops and make them grow, we "must be patient", as James says a second time. As an example of patience he points to the prophets. They learnt patience as their message of repentance was all too often rejected or ignored. And they

learnt patience as they proclaimed the coming of the Saviour, a message that only received its fulfilment centuries after their deaths.

In dark times we need, as I say, patience. We also need to learn to trust the promises of God. In the coming of Jesus, both at his first coming and in his second coming, is hope, hope that the darkness of our lives and the darkness of the world will be dispelled. The promises of God are like the light at the end of the tunnel. Have patience, there is a way out, even if we do not find it for a long time, even if we do not find it indeed in this life.

Finally, there is a third thing we need: we need to trust in God's guidance. The end of patience is not a blazing light, but the offer of a hand to lead us through the darkness. We are promised ultimately a place where there is no darkness, no night and day but eternal light. But to get there, we place our hand in God's hand. I know I've read this before, but I was so bowled over when I discovered it in a church porch on a walk in the Chilterns a couple of years ago that I'm going to read it again:

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year

“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied, “Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.”