



29 April 2012
The Third Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Isaiah 45 vv 1–8
2 Corinthians 4 vv. 5–12

O Lord, open our lips – Lighten our darkness

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The sculptor Cornelia Parker placed dynamite in a garden shed and blew it up. She then collected the thousands of pieces and suspended them from the ceiling of an art gallery in London, freezing in time the moment the explosion happened. All the jagged parts of wooden walls and roof, the contents – the domestic debris of a life collected in a garden shed – all exploded and in suspension around a single bare light bulb at the centre of the fragments hanging in the air. The display of this sculpture, entitled “Cold Dark Matter” has become an iconic moment in the history of the Tate galleries, so powerful was its impact on those who saw it.

The garden shed was full of objects that illustrate and accompany a life – magazines, a chair to relax in, a radio tuned to a favourite station. The explosion was real, and destructive – all the fragments of building and contents were gathered, and then re-assembled, now not a solid earthbound enclosed shed – but a semblance of a shed – with light and air and jagged edges; a shattered building before the pieces fall to earth. Light had been brought to darkness in an innovative and counter intuitive way.

Light and darkness are so much a foundational part of our symbolic structure; they are so powerful in their framing of the world we live in that it is almost impossible to step away from their meaning to reflect on what we might be praying for when we pray “lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord”. The authors of the collect itself give us a clue when they explain what *they* mean at least in the second part of the prayer: “defend us from all perils and dangers of this night”.

In the language of the Book of Common Prayer collect, forged in the crucible years of religious conflict in England, we have before us the powerful symbolic scaffolding that underpins so much Christian literature, liturgical language, biblical meditation and consequently political and contemporary action.

Light and Darkness are metaphors in the Christian tradition used to describe many things; the light of faith, the darkness of doubt. The light of knowledge, the darkness of ignorance. The light of Christ, the darkness of evil. Light by itself is almost synonymous with the presence of God: God is my light and salvation. God's justice is a “light to the nations”. Jesus as identified by Simeon is “a light to lighten the nations” as we heard in the Nunc Dimittis.

In English history we find the same meanings ascribed to light and darkness: the Dark Ages are in the popular imagination a time of ignorance and barbarity. The Enlightenment a period of growing confidence, philosophical and scientific awakening, a flowering, an opening, an increasing in knowledge and expertise. Dark; bad, Light; good.

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But there is an equally strong, but not so visible set of meanings ascribed to the metaphors of Light and Darkness in Christian teaching: and it's wonderfully expressed in the 17th century poet Henry Vaughan's poem "Night".

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;
O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim

This early modern expression of the nature of God being something like a "deep but dazzling darkness" captures the paradox, the unknowability of the presence and nature of God and resists a dualistic *light good dark bad* conclusion. In Genesis, we hear that God said "let there be light" while darkness covered the face of the deep; and far from destroying darkness, God simply established a rhythm of light and dark, and *named* the darkness "night". The rhythm is quickly established as the earth crawls and bursts into life; there was evening and morning, evening and morning, darkness and light. Deep within the Judaeo Christian tradition there is a holistic description of divinely created light and darkness and as we heard in our psalm tonight; the darkness and the light are both alike to God. And from our reading from Isaiah: God's promise is not to make darkness light – but *to give you the treasures of darkness*.

By the time we get to Paul's letters, and the one we heard tonight – the second letter to the Corinthians, we're reminded that God is the one who commands the light to shine out of darkness. The gospel of Jesus Christ is itself described as light. And Paul describes God as "shining". There is in his imagination something burnished and beautiful about the presence of a shining God in the world. Paul himself gets dangerously close to a dualism where the light of God is pitted against the equal and opposite force of darkness and this dualism is highly visible later as popular religion established the birth of Christ at the time of the winter solstice so that it would, like the sun, bring light to the darkest moment of the earth. And the power of these symbols becomes much more than a set of poetic musings or spiritual meditation when the meaning of the metaphors underpins social action. Victorian missionary endeavour was unhelpfully couched in these terms: as a struggle with darkness; whether found in industrial slums, Roman superstition or "darkest" Africa. Light could easily be associated with "enlightened Europeans, light in skin colour, Protestant in faith and progressive in civilisation. Misapplications of the light/darkness motif by the Church have been colossally damaging. (cf Oxford Dictionary of Christian Thought).

Yes, it is night when Judas leaves the Last Supper – but it is also night when Christ is born and the early morning discovery of the events of the night by Mary Magdalene are powerfully described when she comes to the tomb to discover the body of Jesus is not there.

Perhaps one of the most compelling Christian narratives of the power of light and darkness is the conversion of St Paul. He is blinded by a dazzling light on the road to Damascus – but it is in 3 days in the darkness that his conversion happens. Whatever his consuming zeal, and whatever his considerable gifts, his conversion is given to us as a mystical experience that stripped him of these gifts; an experience so overwhelming that it kept him in the darkness.

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We often focus on the light that dazzled and blinded Paul: but the meaning of his change of life is found surely in the darkness. This darkness is the gestation time, a forming and shaping time, this hidden time, and only after this vulnerable time, does the light come once again at the touch of Ananias and the water of baptism break over him. His sense of public theology, his engagement with the issues of the day, his tireless debating and clear sighted writing came from a core experience of the darkness of *not* being able to see.

Saul's gifts of rigour grew through this mystical experience into the new ministry of Paul and gave us a pattern of religious engagement with the political and social reality in which *we* are embedded. As Paul debated the eating laws, the necessity for circumcision, the structure of Roman households, so we debate the big issues of our day; our responsibility towards the planet, the relationships between world faiths, the gap between rich people and poor people, the consumerism that seems to enslave us. But, like Paul, we find our energy and direction from the silence and darkness of the hidden life within us. We know from our own lives that it is not always the grand narrative, the sequence of public events that make up our lives, that shape us and form us. It is often the inbetween times, when we were not looking, when we were ill, or distracted, when we were on the road, or fell in love with someone or with life itself, that we are irrevocably formed and shaped and changed. At our core is a dependence on God and an interdependence on other people that Paul knew as he waited in the darkness for the visit from Ananias. It is from here, that we have the spiritual authority and energy to speak.

So much for our individual experience of darkness and light; what about our common life?

At midnight at Piccadilly Circus where I live, it is light and bright, and crowds are milling around the tube station entrance. A large group of young women all wearing angels wings and pink tee-shirts are screaming their way to Eros to pose for photographs they will not remember taking in the morning. A middle aged man in a dark suit is sitting on the pavement, his head nodding as he fights the impulse just to fall asleep. His suited younger friend leans over him shouting at him it's time to go home. The traffic is solid; the headlights of cars, cabs and night buses wait to turn down Shaftesbury Avenue and the restaurant chefs still dressed in their whites are leaving work having cleaned and scrubbed their kitchens. Sometime in the last 10 years it happened that more of the world's 7 billion population lived in cities than in rural areas. And the environment we have created in cities on every continent, poor and prosperous, is that of a settlement where often initially for reasons of safety, darkness is not tolerated. The more developed or prosperous a city, the more lights are on. It is the case that there are more people in Leicester Square at 3am than at 3pm on a Saturday. We have created, after the example of psalm 91, a perpetual noonday, or, in the words of Frank Sinatra, a city that never sleeps. And sleep deprivation is a form of torture. The fact that we create a vibrant night time economy may be good for our collective prosperity, but it does mean that we never see the stars from whose dust we are formed.

As individuals, we may befriend the darkness within and know that it is precious and given by God and even if it feels as if we are broken by life and lost in this darkness, it is still a gift to us. Collectively, we simply do not have the language or courage to express this publicly – and so we keep the lights on; the Piccadilly Circus kind of light; brash, flashy, drawing attention only to itself. The light we might pray for in the collect is not so much a searchlight as the kind of light that makes artists go to the moors at dawn. A light that, like Cornelia Parker's exploded shed, might cause a rearrangement of everything with which we have surrounded ourselves. It may be a quiet healing kind of light in which our wounds are bathed. But the darkness itself signifies the dazzling presence of God, and however much we may pray for the light or long for the dark; the darkness and the light are both alike.

For this, thanks be to God. Amen.

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