

John 3:19 The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.

Is that true? Do you agree that people love darkness rather than light? Are people basically bad? Let me tell you about the Old Penlee Lifeboat Station. The *Union Star*, on her maiden voyage got into trouble in a storm off the coast of Cornwall. As well as five crewmembers, the captain's wife and two daughters were on board, heading for Christmas in Ireland. At the height of the storm, the ship's engines died and they were helpless on the high seas. Word reached the Penlee Lifeboat Captain, Captain Richards, who chose seven men and headed for the lifeboat station. It was very difficult to put to sea, but the somehow managed to reach the stricken ship and get four people off. By that time the waves were fifty feet high.

Captain Richards radioed that they were bringing the four people they had rescued back to land and then would return for the others. He was never heard from again. That night sixteen people lost their lives. The Penlee Lifeboat Station was never used again; it was left, just as it was that night, as a permanent memorial.

I came across that story in one of Bill Bryson's travel books. He goes on to say *I had never really stopped to consider what an extraordinary thing the Royal National Lifeboat Institution is. Think about it. A troubled ship calls for help, and eight people – teachers, plumbers, the guy who runs the pub – drop everything and put to sea whatever the weather, asking no questions, imperilling their own lives, to try to help strangers. Is there anything more brave and noble than that?*

If St John, the author of the fourth gospel, were here today I would want to challenge his words *people loved darkness rather than light*; and I would use the story of the Penlee lifeboat to make my case. *Come off it, St John! How can you say that people prefer darkness to light when you hear such a story of courage and nobility?* And I would go on to press him further. In all the

difficulties , sometimes terrible difficulties , of the snowstorms of the last couple of weeks, I would tell him of the accounts of people doing acts of kindness to those in distress: stories of doctors walking ten miles to their hospital duty, of volunteers taking Bovril out to drivers stranded on nearby motorways, of farmers going to extraordinary lengths to keep their sheep alive. *Think again, St John!* I would say, if he were here. *The world is full of light and decency and goodness.*

You won't believe this, but by chance St John came to visit me last night; and I put these points to him. And this is what he said in reply.

Come, come Andrew! You must not just tell stories., anecdotal evidence never proved a principle. Anyway two can play at your game. For every Penlee lifeboat I can tell you about the absence of any cease-fire in Syria, no humanitarian aid coming through. For every cup of Bovril on a motorway I can tell you about a child crying herself to sleep each night because she is terrified of the very people who are supposed to protect her and look after her. No, no. the picture is a great deal more complicated than your stories suggest. You need to be a little less naïve.

Anyway, I did not write that "people always loved darkness rather than light. Rather I was saying, and I believe, that there is something in every one of us which tends in that direction, which gives us a bias to loving darkness rather than light. If the words had been around in my day, said St John, I might have used computer language, and said that is how we are programmed; or the language of biology – it's in our DNA.

In the old days, Andrew, Scottish Presbyterians like you would have understood. When they spoke about sin they sometimes got it wrong because they came to think that there was nothing blessed in us at all. But they got it right when they kept reminding us that sin spoils everything. We push God out of the way and put ourselves in the centre of the universe and that just spoils everything. Because we don't love God first and last and all the time we can't love our brothers and our sisters and our enemies the way

we should, and we end up not being able to love ourselves. So people love darkness rather than light.

It's not often that a gospel writer comes all the way to Dunfermline to visit me, so I wanted to make the most of St John's visit, even though I was finding that his conversation needed a good deal of concentration. But I wanted to be clear, so I asked him a question. *When you wrote "the light has come into the world", what exactly did you mean?* And he smiled at me so encouragingly when he heard the question.

Well done, St John replied. The verse is in two parts, and both are important. It is not just "people loved darkness rather than light" but "The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light". It's a way I have of writing, and this is one of the great clues to understanding my book, the Fourth gospel. Whenever I use the word "light" I am writing about Jesus. It is in my book, and in my book alone, that you read that he called himself "The Light of the World". I may be writing about the human condition of light and darkness as well, but I am always writing about Jesus.

The events of Holy Week and of Good Friday are fast approaching. Can you see how the story of the crucifixion illuminates those words about the light coming into the world, but people preferred darkness. He is the Light of the World, but they come for him under the cover of darkness, to take him and drag him off to meet his destiny. He is the King of all that is, but his throne is a cross of agony. He is The Resurrection and the Life, but at the hands of his cruel enemies he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. The way I put it at the beginning of my book was this: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him". Or, as we have been thinking today "The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light."

I'm not accustomed to discussing theology with someone who has written a gospel, John, and I am so grateful to you for giving me your time. Tell me if I have got this right. When you say *The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light* you are talking about two things at the same time. On the one hand you are talking about what happened to

Jesus when Pilate's soldiers took him captive, led him to Calvary, and crucified him. On the other hand you are talking about how we all behave, how we are made up. How each of us has an inbuilt tendency to choose what we ought not to choose, to do what we ought not to do. That reminds me of a hymn we often sing as Good Friday approaches. You won't know it, St. John, but I think you will understand what it says. I think it is what you have been talking about.

1 My song is love unknown,

*2 He came from His blest throne
salvation to bestow;
but man made strange, and none
the longed-for Christ would know.
But oh, my Friend, my Friend indeed,
who at my need His life did spend!*

*4 Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run,
He gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these
themselves displease,
and 'gainst Him rise.*

*6 In life, no house, no home
my Lord on earth might have;
in death, no friendly tomb
but what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was His home,
but mine the tomb wherein He lay.*