

**Watchnight****Light in the darkness***Luke 2:1-20*

Reading the Christmas story, it's hard not to see in it telling the recurrence of the theme of light. "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light." The light that surrounded the presence of the angel-messengers from God, and the light that engulfed the shepherds in their fields. The star of light that led wise men from the East to Bethlehem. And the light with which the nativity scene itself is bathed. From singing angels to adoring shepherds to worshipping wise men. I suspect the early Christian Church set the season of Christmas at this time of year to borrow other imagery – where having gone through the shortest day and longest night of the year, we begin to emerge into the light of a new season and a coming New Year. The story of Christmas, indeed the story of faith, is about light in the darkness.

I remember visiting a little out of the way village in Easter Ross. People who were socially challenging were often housed there. I went to the local primary school to meet the children. The school, I was told when I got there, never had any visits from anyone. I went round the classes, and then took part in a special assembly. There had been a fire a few days before in one of the village houses. A family had been burned out of their home, and nobody knew why. A ten-year-old boy in the school was worried about the little children in the house who had lost all their toys. The boy himself was a tough little character, from a very difficult home background; he found school difficult. But this little boy went round his classmates and asked them (without too many menaces) to donate one toy each and then took them to the rehoused family. I was asked to congratulate him as the 'star pupil' of the week. As it happened, in my pocket, I always carried

little wooden stars, carved from Palestinian olive wood. "But I never get anything", the boy told me. "You've come all this road to give me this? I don't deserve it." The school assembly and teachers began to applaud, and he burst into tears. We all burst into tears. Out of a house-fire, kindness. Out of a broken little life, generosity. Out of darkness, light.

In Glasgow, in the Queen Elizabeth hospital, with its distinctive shape, the locals call it the 'Death Star' as it looks like something out of Star Wars, I met a new mum in the maternity ward. She told me how, after a difficult pregnancy and labour the chaplain had come to her bedside and said a prayer for the mother and child. The woman who was a lapsed Catholic, said, "It was like an angel speaking. It was very quiet, and there was light, and after the worry and the pain, it gave me peace. When I get home, I'm going back to church. The chaplain showed me the hope, and light." The chaplain wasn't doing anything more than her job, but I wonder what the lasting difference was for that young mother, and her baby. Out of the pain, comfort. Out of the fear, hope. Out of the darkness, light.

I remember visiting Stockholm and going to a church that worked with child refugees. Somehow these young people, most under 16 years, had found their way from Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria to Sweden. Many had lost family relatives in the wars. I learned not to ask how they had got there, or what price they had to pay. I remember one boy, just about to turn 18. He came from Kabul. Some of his family had been killed by the Taleban. Others by bombs dropped by US forces. It was a desperate story. The church I visited had taken him in and provided him with support. One of the older ladies took a shine to him and she put him up in her home. He called her 'My Swedish grandmother.' It was the first time in a couple of years that he had a safe place to stay. A bright destination at the end of a dark road. For her, an opportunity to live out, as she told me, her Christian faith. "He was a stranger, and I took him in." She was in the process of adopting him,

with the support of her grown-up family. They'd all been charmed by this young man, who spent his time cooking meals (his father had been a café owner), the only way he could think of to show his thanks. He remained a Muslim, staying in that Christian home. But the roads of faith, tolerance and understanding converged, and I remember his delight in learning about Christians who, like Muslims, also believed in the God of Abraham. Out of terror, reassurance. Out of destitution, a home. Out of darkness, light.

Six years ago, I was in Israel-Palestine, just after the Christmas season. As Moderator, you give out little gifts as you travel around. I had chosen to give out these olive wood holding crosses, made from Palestinian wood. They're made in Bethlehem, and in the shape of a cross. It's like holding Christmas and Easter in your hand at the same time. They're made, with the stars, in little back street workshops in a couple of collectives that are supported by the Church of Scotland. I got to travel the dusty road to Bethlehem to the place they were made. One of the workshops was run by a father and son. The son had learning difficulties. But the boy was a gifted carpenter. I watched with amazement, and counted his fingers carefully, as he carved out the little wooden stars that I was giving out to children in Scotland, including the boy from that Primary School. I asked the young carpenter what his name was. "My name is Elias; and I am the boy who makes the stars." At the end of that dusty road, in a back-street of Bethlehem, a boy made stars, to brighten my faith and the faith of many others. Out of the darkness of Israel Palestine, light.

Like the star in the Christmas story whose image and poetry and imagination illuminated angels, and shepherds, and wise men, and a family in a stable, and the Christ-child. Out of the poetry of Christmas, little fragments of remembered stories. Out of diverse realities, heaven and earth, unclean workers in fields and their sheep; mysterious visitors from a far country; a homeless family

in the stable of an inn; the Saviour of the world an infant and lying in a manger. Out of darkness, light.

One of the privileges of standing up here in the pulpit, six feet above contradiction, is seeing all of you. Members of the congregation. Members of the community in Morningside. Visitors from other parts of the city, and other parts of the country and world. Coming to Church out of tradition, or a sense of duty, or because Christmas 'speaks' to you in ways other parts of the faith story do not. Coming from a year filled with hope and success, or fear and failure. Of births and marriages and bereavements. Of beginnings and endings. Coming in out of the darkness, and into the light of this sanctuary. With its tree and its candles and its lights overhead. And perhaps finding yourselves, for this moment, this precious moment of truth, vulnerable to God's message of love displayed tenderly to you in the form of an infant child in a manger. All of His love, and mercy, and hope, and kindness, and joy, and courage – just for you.

The Christmas story is about what really matters. Almost every detail of the story is about something easily ignored or people who were habitually told they didn't matter.

You matter. Whatever darkness you may have come out of, whatever light may be filling your life, you matter to God. Into every pain, comfort. Into every fear, hope.

Let this warm truth touch your hearts, as this Christmas Eve unfolds into Christmas Day. May the comfort, hope and light of the Christmas story be with you all today. From whatever darkness, be found by the light. Have a very happy Christmas.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit      Amen**