

Sermon

Advent 4 2011

All Saints, Blackheath

Fr Richard Peers SCP

Who's afraid of the dark? We human beings seem to be born with an instinctive fear of darkness.

When I was little I had two fears: one was the two foot dark space between the bookcase at the head of my bed and the wall, I wonder now whether it was my parents way of making sure I stayed in bed.

The second was a fear that in our day of duvets, or continental quilts as they used to be called we can only remember, the fear of wriggling down to the bottom of the bed with the tucked and sheets and getting stuck in the dark until my dad came and rescued me.

As we approach the shortest day of the year, as we stand at the threshold of darks brief victory over light we might spare a thought for how our ancient ancestors conceived of darkness. For the Greek's Erebus, the god of darkness, is one of the first generation of gods, the offspring of Chaos itself.

Erebus was also for them the dark place through which the dead must pass before coming to their final resting place.

We fear the dark, the hidden corners, the unseen paths, the stranger lurking, and yet the darkness is exciting, a time for play not work, for partying, drinking, music and fun. darkness is a time for making love, for telling stories and sharing memories. For sitting by a fire and sipping beer.

And think about this, it is in darkness that we find our beginnings, the darkness of the primordial chaos over which the spirit hovers at the beginning of creation in Genesis and the darkness of the coming of Christ.

he Annunciation must be one of the most common subjects for Christian art and how often it looks like the painter has never read the account of the annunciation that we have just heard from St Luke. As the angel announces to Mary that she is to conceive, there is no blast of light or heavenly beam as is so often shown in artistic portrayals. Quite the opposite Mary is wrapped in darkness as the power of the most high OVERSHADOWS her.

the poet Luci Shaw captures this perfectly in her poem The Overshadow.

When we think of God, and
angels, and the Angel,
we suppose ineffable light.

So there is surprise in the air
when we see him bring to Mary,
in her lit room, a gift of darkness.

What is happening under that
huge wing of shade? In that mystery
what in-breaking wildness fills her?

She is astonished and afraid; even in
that secret twilight she bends her head,
hiding her face behind the curtain

Of her hair; she knows that
the rest of her life will mirror
this blaze, this sudden midnight.

This sudden midnight.

Christian tradition is full of powerful images of darkness as the way to God. Most famously perhaps in the work of St John of the Cross whose feast the church celebrated this past week. For John the dark night symbolises the letting go of all that we hold onto, the holding on to which obscures our knowledge and understanding of God. famously this is known as the 'dark night of the soul' and is expressed beautifully in his poem Stanzas o. The Soul:

1. One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Two centuries earlier an English writer called this the Cloud of Unknowing which both separates us from but is also the means by which we come to know God.

God is real and true, but God is so different from anything that we know that we can only find God by leaving behind the known and entering into that sudden midnight. reading Luke's account of the annunciation we know the rest of the story. Mary did not. Look at how little the angel communicates. She must have felt fear and awe, confusion and doubt under the shadow of that darkness. Wordsworth reflecting on darkness, on Rebus writes:

Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our Minds....

Fear and awe should be part of each of our lives. Time spent reflecting on our lives, our loves our world.

The darkness need not be our enemy if we look into our minds.

Over the next two weeks lets enjoy the darkness and welcome its embrace. Let us face all darkness with the excitement of making our way to the midnight mass of Christmas, with the expectation that I had as a child waking early in the dark of Christmas morning desperate to open my presents.

If we can enter the darkness, the Cloud of unknowing, if we can set off on the great adventure that is knowing God more deeply like Mary we may find that God has conceived in us more than we could ever have conceived of.