

20141214AdventIIISermon Holy Darkness

Darkness terrifies us, consumes us. Ask any director of horror movies - it is what happens in the dark that really frightens the movie goers. I remember going on a school tour of the Castle here in Cape Town and how we all entered the cell that Adam Tas was locked in, how the guide switched off the light and there was utter darkness and all us school boys shrieked out loudly. On the other hand the right kind of darkness can give us peace; for example. Utter darkness gave be the right venue for a good night of peaceful sleep .

I was reading about a Catholic priest who went on a tour of a place where utter darkness could be achieved. When the guide switched off the light, the priest tells us: "a deep, unrelieved darkness settled around us and around everything else. Eyes open, eyes closed, it was all the same. No light, no shadow, no least glow. Obviously we felt trapped and afraid, lost in a strange place, our eyes put out. But the result was just the opposite. Against all reason, we felt great: great rest, great peace. "I'll turn the light back on now," the guide whispered after several minutes, but we stopped him. "No, no, leave it off. Give us more time." We sat, unseeing, united, consoled by the warmth and depth of absolute night. When the tiny little bulb did finally return, our own eyesight surprised us. Seeing was like a memory that had slipped away. The dark had formed a resting place, it seems, in which our souls re-charged, our eyes recovered their innocence. Without notice, maybe our daylight world had become too ordinary, too usual, too much just a tool to be used. But now it seemed miraculous, a gift given by God—even if it came through an insignificant light bulb."

Eskom and its load-shedding has recently brought darkness to our homes but we do not see it in the same light (whoops! wrong word to use!)...we don't see it in the same way as that priest and his companions did. Because of that perhaps we are more like the people who came from all over Judea and those who came down from Jerusalem to see this strange person, John the Baptist.

We heard in our Gospel reading that the people were hungry for light. "Are you the light?" they shout to John the Baptist and quoting Isaiah they might have asked him: 'Will you "bring glad tidings to the poor, healing to the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release the prisoners"?' 'I am only pointing you toward the light,' the Baptist said. 'He will be here soon. Hold on to my arm and let me lead you into that light.'

This is our second week of looking at John the Baptist. Last Sunday the focus of the gospel lesson was on preparation, on making ready for the coming of the King of Kings. The emphasis was on making a clean sweep of our lives, of cleaning every corner and clearing away every mess in order to be ready. This cleaning process, this turning from all that would separate us from God is the beginning of something new. The old would come to an end and something completely new would begin.

Now, this 3rd Sunday of Advent, it's time to lighten up—in more ways than one. This Sunday is also known as Gaudete or "Joy" Sunday. Its name comes from our 2nd Lesson from 1 Thessalonians, which began "**Rejoice** always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (5:16-18).

This Sunday marks the halfway point of this penitential, reflective season, so if St Paul's had them, I would wear rose coloured vestments to signal this lightening of mood. This is why the third candle of the Advent wreath I lit at the beginning of the service is rose. Gaudete Sunday offers a time of encouragement and respite before continuing one's spiritual preparation for Christmas. Even our psalm anticipates hope and joy.

In addition to this lighter more joyous mood, we are encouraged to lighten up in another way, to look toward the light of the Son and point to that light. Like John, we as Christians are called to testify to the light. So just what does that mean?

It means allowing the light of Christ to fill those spaces in our lives, in our hearts, that we have swept clean after last week's lessons. It means taking seriously our part in the advent of God right now, here on earth, in our own individual contexts. It involves, as Isaiah tells us, bringing "good news to the oppressed" and binding "up the broken-hearted." We are called to "proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour". We are to comfort those who grieve and to do justice.

We? Yes **we**. You and me, the church, followers of Christ. **We** are to do this. You might be thinking right now that you are no John the Baptist and nor do you think the Church is really doing much in the role of pointing to the light very well. Karl Rahner, a Catholic Theologian of the 20th Century wrote about us being the imperfect messengers:

No, there is no way around it. We will have to listen to the voice of the one calling in the wilderness, even though he says: I am not the one. We will have to muster the patience of the true Advent person. The church is only the voice of one calling in the wilderness, a voice saying that the ultimate, the glorious kingdom of God, is yet to come, but only when he wills it and not when we would like it. We cannot disregard this voice simply because it comes out of the mouths of people; we cannot ignore the messenger of the church simply because he is not worthy to untie the shoestrings of his master, the one he is announcing, or because he is not able to call down fire from heaven the way Elijah did. It is simply still Advent. Even the church is still an Advent church, for we are still waiting for the one to come in revealed splendour of absolute divinity along with the eternal kingdom. [Karl Rahner 1904-1984 in *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*]

Every night darkness covers the face of the earth, but it is not a forever darkness. The light is coming. The dark will give way to light. The same with the dark nights of our souls and the dusk of our despair. They too will be replaced with the light of Christ's love and grace. Make way for that light to be kindled in your heart. Prepare for it to banish the night. Be ready to point to it, to share it, and to live in it. Are you still in the darkness, a place as dark as Adam Tas's cell in the castle? Have you found an arm to hold onto in that darkness? What is your experience of darkness? Maybe terror is its name. Know, however unrelieved your dark night may be, that there is still, always, the promise of light. When you have been deprived of light for a long, long time, even one speck of light will change everything.

A tiny child might provide it for you on Christmas Eve! Yes, the light is coming again and again and always. As George Harrison sung, with a different spelling, "Here comes the Son!"