

**Dawn**

*Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23*

At 4.45am on Sunday 21st January 2018 I left the Church of Scotland's St Andrew's Guest House in Jerusalem for the short drive to Bethlehem and Checkpoint 300. The Checkpoint is one of the main crossings between Palestine and Israel, and in the mornings thousands of people queue to get through the Checkpoint and to their workplaces in Israel. Some have travelled an hour before they even get to the Checkpoint, and queues can be anything from thirty minutes to a number of hours.

We drank coffee from the vendors who ply their trade at the entrance to the Checkpoint, and had a conversation with some of them who were interested to know why three Europeans were joining line, then we joined the Palestinians passing through the queue.

Many face a commute to work before dawn, but not like this. You are corralled into steel mesh corridors above ground before going down and into completely enclosed spaces. You are crammed in. There's a little bit of jostling, but not much as people very, very slowly make their way forward through the dark, closed space. Lighting is minimal, a few people have their mobile phones on. Once you are in, there's no way back, you move relentlessly forward, zig-zagging through the claustrophobic space. If you want to get through more quickly, you can climb up the walls on either side, and edge your way along the railings, clinging to the mesh that covers the walls. At one point as I looked up, and back, and forward, there were almost as many people edging their way along the walls as there were on the ground.

It was January, but the atmosphere was stifling. I can't imagine what it must have been like in the hotter months. If you felt faint, there was no way back. If you needed the lavatory, there was nowhere to go. If you had a heart attack, or some other medical condition, you could only hope that someone might help. But the pressure is to keep moving forward. We were lucky, it took us forty-five minutes to reach the checkpoint on the Israeli side, where passports were checked. Sometimes, if there is a hold up, or a problem, you can be trapped in the tunnel for hours. It's utterly dehumanising.

What have these people left behind, and what are they traveling towards? In a C21st democracy, what are the messages here in the State of Israel, and for the Palestinians who are made to feel like

strangers in their own home. To make a living, work is scarce and poorly paid in the Palestinian controlled areas like Bethlehem. Better money, but not by much, can be made on the Israeli side. Buses wait to take you to your work on the Israeli side, but there's a tight timetable. If you miss the bus, you lose your job. If you miss your bus back later in the day, your right to travel from Palestinian territory to Israeli territory, can be limited, or revoked, and not only for you but for your family.

We had entered the checkpoint in the dark, and emerged into the early light on the other side. I spoke briefly to one man as we edged our way through and asked him, 'Why do you do this? Surely there must be something better?'

"I am walking into the dawn", is what he said to me. And as he spoke, there were tears in his eyes. There were tears in mine.

I didn't think to ask his name, but I will never forget him. And that phrase: "I am walking into the dawn." Both our readings this morning, one quoting the other, echo something of that idea. People walking in darkness, seeing and moving towards the light. In the bleakness of January, for many one of the longest months of the year, we are already more than a month away from the shortest day. Imperceptibly, but definitely, the days are lengthening, we are walking into the dawn and light is coming. It is the kind of light that gives direction and drives out fear.

Isaiah talks about walking in darkness; Matthew talks about sitting in darkness; but walking or sitting, the light is coming, the days are lengthening. Dawn is breaking.

In the dark times it is hard not to give in to the temptation of pessimism. The ecological crisis is real. The stories of cruelty and inhumanity so often dominate the news. The economy of our world talks of old businesses folding. A new health scare from China emerges. We want to believe that life, especially for the average good person, should be easier, but the painfully obvious truth is that life is hard. Most of us have more medical issues in our future than in our past more tears to come than we have already shed. The carefree days never last long. Our work moves from one difficulty to another, no sooner one problem solved than another looms large. Some of us worry about being alone. Others worry about family. Some have concerns about their relationships. Others look at their lengthening years and wonder if life has been worth it. We sit in darkness. We walk in darkness.

And yet. And yet. It is not the bloodiness of life that quickens our hearts. It is not the awfulness of the news that makes us set our face to the future. It is not the bleakness of the political world that stirs our imagination.

It is the longing for light. When life is at its darkest, even the faintest flicker of light makes us breathe a little faster and open our eyes a little wider. We long for light, because we understand that the world is dark. Light is the promise that something important is on its way. The night seems long, and it is hard to speak of the dawn, and yet as night rolls over into day, we know, we always know, that the dawn will break. That light will come. The poet Longfellow writes, “the nearer the dawn, the darker the night.” But that does not mean the dawn is not near.

There will be some here in Church today for whom this present darkness is their reality. News in recent times about health, family, work, or a relationship will have lowered the clouds of life. Others will feel that life has got stuck into some awful rut, and the harder they try to move, the deeper they seem to get. Others soldier on with a secret worry or concern or shame or fear that they feel none can help. January is the kind of grim month when all of that seems too real, too painful, too present. And yet. And yet. In the aftermath of the devastating fires in Australia, life has already begun to spring. In the bloomless gardens, buds are appearing, and the first snowdrops are out. And in the hall next door, people have baked and made things for our delight.

In the face of relationship break-up, or work burn-out, or a diagnosis of cancer, or living with frailty, you might well be wondering, “Is that all he has to offer – snowdrops and marmalade?” Yet I say to you: it is in these tiny little things, these ordinary and mundane things, more often than not, that the coming light, the intimations of dawn, might come. Yes, the grand gesture, the breathtaking image, the jaw-dropping moment may also be just beyond the horizon. But first, in the smallness of things, in the littleness of the everyday, the changing texture of darkness into gloaming, of gloaming into pearly grey, and of pearly grey into the rose-tints of dawn, will first be seen, heard, felt.

Standing on the far-side of Checkpoint 300, having had my passport verified, and my fingerprints taken, I stood with my colleagues on the outside. The man I had been crushed against for the last half hour had gone off into the darkness, to find the bus that would take him to work. He had walked into the dawn, to his job to earn enough to keep him and his family alive for another day, another week,

another month, another year. Not much, but enough. Not the full blaze of sunlight, but the dawn and enough light by which to see and to move onward, hopefully, and with determination.

As each day dawns it might be that for us a similar reality exists. In amongst all the questions about life, and meaning, and justice, it might begin with something simpler, but equally profound. Did you start the day, hoping for the light? Did you start the day determined to seek faith in the dawn and so move onwards to whatever awaited?

It is no coincidence to me that the resurrection stories in the gospels begin in the darkness of a tomb, whose stone door is rolled away, and Jesus is not found. But out in the garden, in the cool of the morning air, in the first hint of dawn, at first birdsong, in the uncertain light, the hope of the world, the joy of the world, the light of the world is found. Not in blazing glory, but in the dawn, so that eyes might adjust, and begin to see the One Who brings healing, and hope, and peace, and forgiveness, and light.

Whatever darkness may be yours, past, present, future; look for Jesus and your relief in the breaking dawn. Light will come.

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

**Amen**