

Come to the light

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

There used to be a kind of melodramatic film from yesteryear where the hero or heroine, having bravely battled through the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, performing acts of selfless sacrifice, finds themselves coming towards the end of their life. There's usually a sound of a distant, angelic choir, almost certainly a harp or two being strummed in the background, and if there is any drapery around it's moving graciously in a gentle breeze. The hero or heroine, propped up in bed, or supported in the arms of a loved one or battle-scarred colleague, raises their head for a moment, and an unearthly light bathes the scene as they slip gently into their final sleep and death, and light, claims them.

Cathy and Heathcliff in the film version of *Wuthering Heights* walking off into the light over the heavenly Yorkshire moors. John Henry Newman's hymn, *Lead kindly light*, has the same idea:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on...*

And the idea is even more pronounced in Henry Frances Lyte's hymn, *Abide with me*:

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes,
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee:
In life and death, O Lord, abide with me.*

In contemporary culture the idea of coming to the light can also be found. Near the end of the Harry Potter story, where the young wizard hovers between life and death, he comes to, in a bright mist, in what may have been a railway station. He talks to an old friend and teacher, who, having imparted his last wisdom moves towards the light, and the opportunity to travel on.

In John's Gospel, this idea of darkness and light is a major theme. Darkness can symbolise ignorance, unknowing, despair, evil and death. Light is the symbol for wisdom, insight, hope, goodness and life. Just before our reading one of the Pharisees, a man called Nicodemus, comes to Jesus, 'by night', seeking to find out Who Jesus was and what Jesus had come to do in the world. The next time we read of Nicodemus is on Good Friday when he, with Joseph of Arimathea, came to bury the body of Jesus in the tomb, also at night.

In our reading, the gospel writer goes on to explain what the coming of Jesus means. It tells us about God so loving the world that God gives us Jesus, Who will come to heal, and forgive, and speak for justice, and act with mercy. Jesus will come to save and not to condemn, just as the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses would, in the story about him, save from death those bitten by poisonous snakes. Look, and live, in the Moses story. But believe, and live in John's explanation of Who Jesus is and what He has come to do. We are not just to look at Jesus, we are to believe in Him.

Here is the promise of God's divine love for the world, for everyone, to bring us through. God's love comes to save, to pull us through danger. God's love is to liberate from oppression, to open the doors of what imprisons us, to heal us and make us whole. "Jesus came to save us from all those fears that close us up in ourselves. He came to liberate us and open us up to love. He came to give us the very life of God so that it may flow in us and through us."ⁱ

Jesus comes into our sometime darksome world and lives and calls us to, "*come to the light.*"

It can be a tough road. As we get closer to the light we can see what we are, and what we are not. That's rarely completely comfortable, but it's healing, and it's hopeful. For such is the attraction of the One Who is the light that we are drawn, even if we don't fully understand why, even if we're not too sure about Him, but we come in trust, and as Jesus reaches out to us, we find ourselves reaching out to Him. The One Who murmurs to us, I love you just as you are. I love you so much that I've come to heal you and help you, and to give you life. The One Who tells us not to be afraid; that it is all right to be ourselves; that we don't have to be perfect or clever. That we will be loved just as we are.

We might not feel worthy, we might not feel it can really be true, but the call to us comes anyway. We have the choice. To come to the light. Because God so loved the world.

Some find the light difficult. Perhaps we all find the light difficult. We know who we are; we know what we have been; we remember what we have done. We are all frightened about being shown up, or being found out. We don't want others to see those shady areas in our lives, the places that are broken. I suspect it is because we don't want to be rejected, and left out. Why take the risk of coming to the light when there's so much to lose?

But the call to come to the light still comes. Because God so loved the world. God so loves us. God sees beyond our sense of unworthiness, our shame, our messed up attempts at faith, our inconsistency, our embarrassment. God sees beyond our worst 'us', to see our best 'us'. God sees that we are so much better than the worst things we have ever done or been. Because God, in Jesus, the light of the world, calls us to see the light and be seen in the light of God's mercy and love. Come to the light, because God so loved the world. We shouldn't hang back, we should, however nervously, step forward. We shouldn't choose darkness; we should come to the light. This light and darkness language is found throughout the Gospel. It has to do with God's judgement being transformed by God's mercy. Our response to God's light reveals our true identity. "The Greek word for judgement in verse 19 is *krisis*, from which our English word 'crisis' comes. The coming of Jesus results in a crisis that demands a decision. Neutrality is not a possibility."ⁱⁱ

What do we fundamentally think God is doing? God sends Jesus to rescue us from darkness and offer us the gift of light and life. God comes into the world in Jesus to remind us again, and again, that the love God has is so huge that it embraces the whole world, that it embraces us.

The light keeps coming again and again into the darkness of the world, so that we might live God's future now. God's shameless love for us, despite who we are, keeps holding light out towards us. Until, at last, we choose to come to the light.

Lent is the perfect time for us to consider our response to the darkness/light crisis that Jesus precipitates. It is the perfect time to work out if we have responded to the call to come to the light or if we are still, for whatever reason, holding back in the shadow. How have you chosen?

"From the first choice we make in the morning until we choose to go to sleep at night, we are making decisions that form our lives. We choose in the words we speak or do not speak, the people we love or do not even see, the thoughts we entertain or reject, the deeds we do or leave undone. God has chosen to help us choose eternal life... We choose to build up or tear down, love or ignore, heal or hurt, bless or curse."ⁱⁱⁱ If we get it wrong, the call will come again, and again, and again, until, at last, *we come to the light*. Because God so loved the world. Because God so loves us, now, still, always.

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

Amen

ⁱ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, p86

ⁱⁱ W Hulitt Gloer, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, p121

ⁱⁱⁱ Brett Younger, *Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol 1*, p73