



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 24th December 2021

Readings: *Isaiah 52.7-10 and John 1.1-14*

Christmas Eve

Last week, Radio 4 listeners may have heard Adrian Dunbar's reading of Roy Foster's recent book entitled, *On Seamus Heaney*.¹ They'd have learned a great deal about the Irish Nobel Literature laureate, and what a deep, engaging man he was; a poet and a performer, shaped by what has been described elsewhere as 'an apparent nostalgia for a lost world of rural simplicities.'² Born in Northern Ireland, but choosing to live in Dublin, he longed for healing of that long-standing division. He knew its cost, and was renowned as a reconciler. Apparently, in a text to his wife, using his beloved Latin, his last words were, *Noli timere*, don't be afraid.³

As poets often do, Heaney speaks into our reality, and maybe no less so this Christmas Eve. In *noli timere*, there is something movingly simple, which maybe says all there is to say, quite apart from how it echoes the angels' song in Scripture's exquisite narratives of this night. With Covid being as it is, the coronavirus feeds our anxiety; we do not know quite what the next chapter holds, and we are not used to that. Somehow, though, living in a covid-shaped era also intensifies the other anxieties that cast their shadow: climate change and natural disaster, international tension and politicians 'naïve with power', as Waldo Williams had it in last Sunday's poem.⁴ And then there is the pall that is sometimes spread upon our own shoulders by life's personal tragedies, or more poignantly, by the sheer silence of loneliness. We can be, as Robert Frost has it, 'acquainted with the night'.⁵ *Pause* And as his final word, Heaney says, *Noli timere*.

Not being afraid is a profoundly Christian suggestion. Angels, prophets, rabbis, all urge fearlessness. But for the Christian not being afraid is not a credulous naiveite, marked by an uncritical gullibility. For me, it finds deep roots in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, which Jane just read in the version authorised in 1611 by King James VI and I. This opening sequence of verses might have been added to the second edition of the Gospel as a refinement of the authors' original script. Whatever its beginnings, is it not a word as evocative tonight as on any other Christmas Eve that it has blessed?

The writer - we'll call him John - seems to focus on the key idea that there is a major conflict between darkness and light. That darkness is used as an image of evil, and it's as if John believes evil 'exists as a perpetual threat to the fulfilment of God's purposes in creation.'⁶ Hence the light and darkness battle. Of course, we may prefer other language, eschewing the word 'evil', but I find pretty compelling the suggestion that there are competing forces in the world.

One force - is it darkness? - stirs us

- to *blame others* and seek revenge, be it at home or on the global stage;
- to *imperil the common good*, so long as 'I'm alright, Jack';
- to *exploit the earth's resources*, despite the impact upon those who come after us;
- to *drive a wedge* between group A and group B, because they are different.

Whilst the other force - is it light? - inspires us

- to *forgive* seventy times seven;
- to *go the extra mile* for others' wellbeing;

¹ Foster, R. F. 2020 *On Seamus Heaney* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press

² *Comment in The Guardian*, 31st August 2013

³ Foster, pages 198ff

⁴ Williams, Rowan 2002 *In the days of Caesar* (translation from the Welsh of Waldo Williams) in *The Poems of Rowan Williams* Oxford: The Perpetua Press page 87

⁵ Frost, Robert, ed Edward Connery Lathem 1969 from *Acquainted with the night*, in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston page 255

⁶ Lindars, Barnabas 1972 *The Gospel of John* in the series, *The New Century Bible Commentary* London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott page 77

- to *adjust our personal lifestyles*, living simply so that others can simply live;
- to *build bridges* across humanity's caverns of background, identity or wealth, of philosophy, religion or culture.

However we prefer to describe it, that distinction between the forces that influence us seems to me to be at the heart of the dichotomy which the Fourth Gospel acknowledges from its opening words. I can see the truth in characterising it as darkness and light.

What is more, I recognise the truth that each person faces a choice between the two. Is it not in choosing 'light' over 'darkness' that we gain the confidence not to be afraid? After all, darkness has its appeal so that, often, the selecting of light instead of darkness has to be a determined decision of the will. Of course, sometimes opting for light is an OK choice. The light seems alluring enough. But golly, how magnetic darkness is! I wonder if Paul speaks for you as much he does for me: 'I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.'⁷

So, might this be why we are here, gathered at the crib, this evening, aware of the pull of darkness and the peculiar slant of light? Sure, the choice between darkness and light is for us to make, but the Christian faith wants us to understand that such a choice is possible because of the prior choice that God has made. As Barnabas Lindars has it, 'The appearance of Jesus on the plane of history is the irruption of light from the divine realm into the created order, where evil is rampant.'⁸ He is, as John will later put it, 'the light of the world'. And as the Jesus's life and work progress, so the cross looks like the snuffing out of that light, but then 'three days later', there blazes from the tomb a light of which nothing less exotic than resurrection could possibly be an image. *Noli timere* indeed! But not because we are pure enough, clever enough or cunning enough to stand up to the darkness. We can walk in the light because that empty tomb casts its inextinguishable glow upon our path.

Somehow, the light of Christ draws us into its rays rather like a moth is attracted to a lamp on a warm summer's evening when we have the window open. And it is

the light of the Servant King that enables us to serve,
 the light of the King of Love that enables us to love,
 the light of the Wisdom of God that helps us discern truth,
 the light of the One for Others that helps us 'each other's needs to prefer'.⁹

We love because he first loved us. *Noli timere*.

There is a battle between darkness and light. What folly to deny it! But it is not a new battle, nor is it ours to win. Tonight, the Christian's life is about choosing to walk in the light by kneeling at its manger. And then, as we peer into the New Year, to accept our MP's challenge and be beacons of hope piercing our era's 'slant light' with the glorious light of a love that that nothing can defeat, neither evil, nor pain, nor death.¹⁰

So we light the Christmas Candle, the cumulative light of Advent brought to fulfilment on this holy night as we celebrate the word made flesh and dwelling among us.

N. P. Uden

24th December 2021

⁷ Romans 7.19 NIV

⁸ Lindars, page 24

⁹ see the Hymn, *From heaven you came*, Graham Kendrick at Rejoice and Sing 522.4.3

¹⁰ A reference to the Christmas card from Daniel Zeichner MP, to Downing Place United Reformed Church, December 2021