



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden at Midnight Communion on Christmas Eve 2020

Hebrews 1.1-14; John 1.1-14

This night casts a golden glow over a grey world.

The reality of 2020 is so different from what we may have imagined. Even with so called 20/20 vision, no-one foresaw this year of coronavirus. No organisation's risk assessment planned careful mitigation of the challenge government, businesses, schools and the health service have faced, of the struggle and suffering too many have been through, or of the enigma and uncertainty we all have endured. It has indeed been grey.

And then, with unrelenting predictability, Christmas Eve comes along. That's what happens on 24th December. Just as we have become used to hearing people say that Covid-19 doesn't know it's Christmas, so Christmas Eve arrives in apparent disregard of how so much has been re-shaped by the virus. Maybe it's that Christmas Eve will not be supplanted by anything - that nothing will stop Christmas Eve being Christmas Eve. If so, what novel thing might the Christmas Gospel have to say this year? What new thing does the pandemic require us to find in the Christmas story?

I am struck that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was writing in troubling times, too. He characterises his readers as having 'drooping hands' and 'weak knees'. (12.12) Their problem wasn't a health crisis. Rather it seems that the church was in a bad place. Tired, unsure of itself, even unsure of its God and the one who reveals God. On balance, the pandemic does actually have the potential to do that to us, both as individuals and as the church. As the months drag on, tiredness and drained confidence are not far from the surface.

Like us, this writer must have wondered how to speak into such circumstances. It's certainly not easy to know how to say helpful things at Christmas 2020; how to say things that sound up to date and relevant, that don't sound pietistic or platitudinous. So what did the writer to the Hebrews say, that might help us find some gold amidst the grey this Christmas Eve?

Well, interestingly, in his own idiosyncratic way, he told them about neither more nor less than Jesus Christ. Not dumbed down, not Jesus-lite, as it were, but the truth as he saw it. With elegant eloquence, our writer speaks about the God who made everything, and about Jesus Christ as 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.'

Moreover, it is this writer who wants us to know that Jesus is 'the same yesterday, today and forever' (13.8) The point is that we are not to go looking for new religious ideas so much as to re-new our focus upon the definitive religious idea that Jesus Christ is.

As I read the prologue to John's Gospel, I have three thoughts for this midnight hour.

First, God is the source of life, and John's point is that the life God grants is best understood as light. It's the sort of light that not only helps us to see *objects*, but also to understand *what*

matters most. When everything around us can leave us feeling like we are groping in the dark - and how 2020 has felt like that! - God is the light which shows us the pathway for both this life *and* beyond death. The Psalmist's take is this: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?' (27.1) In such shadowy times as these is that light not what we need, to bring our lives, to bring *all* life, to the abundance that God wills for us?

Secondly, the light of God that shines in us through Christ is not vulnerable to being extinguished. The world's darkness can threaten all sorts of light – including yours and mine – but not God's. When the world's darkness took Jesus to the cross it failed. The whole point of the Easter story is that the darkness could not put out the light. Even today's darkness can't do that.

And **finally**, this life and light-giver is not remote, but has invested the divine self completely in the dross, the darkness of this world. It's illustrated by this idea of becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us, of pitching the divine tent in our back gardens. The pandemic is no sign that God has gone absent. On the contrary, all the compassion it is has stirred is the sign that God is enduringly with us. Tonight – 'bleak midwinter' that it can seem - God is piercing the shadows with that heavenly love, which is not episodic but eternal.

These are not innovative thoughts, and that is exactly the point. Like the writer of Hebrews, I offer lasting truths about God – 'eternal verities', as Buffier has it. In this season, so unprecedented in our own lifetimes, these are the things to cling to, to proclaim and to live by. They are the gold that this night casts upon a grey world:

And as we live out what we believe, in lives that bear radiant light and radically generous love in these otherwise unbearable times, so that gold redeems the grey, and always will. The world will be blessed and God will be glorified. What is more, our own joy will be made complete.

May it be so this Christmas, and every day.

N. P. Uden
24th December 2020