

Sunday 25th December 2005: Christmas Day

‘The flick of a tail’

Readings: Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-14

Imagine a large aquarium, of the sort that you might perhaps take children to. The tank has many windows set at different angles. You look through the window and see a fish in the murk. And then you walk round and look through another window and you see a fish but you’re not sure if it’s the same fish that you saw before. Elusive, hard to grasp, beautiful, murky, confusing, intriguing, with connections that we sense are there but that aren’t always easy to make. The world is a complex place.

Think of that large aquarium with windows set at different angles. When Mary Midgeley, the philosopher, was asked about God she related her answer to that scene where we’re in darkness but the tank is lit though the water is murky and she said that she had, perhaps, experienced God as ‘the flick of a tail.’

This has been a hard year for the world and for countless individuals in it. It feels as if there’s been a long Advent journey of darkness – waiting for the light. From the Asian tsunami to hurricanes in the Caribbean and the southern United States. From earthquakes in Pakistan to unimaginable numbers of children orphaned through AIDS in Africa. Bombings, kidnaps, starvation, murder, corruption, civil war, refugees. And, it feels, more than the usual number of personal tragedies and hard places for individuals though that’s unquantifiable of course. It’s been a difficult year – much of it involving issues that the human race should not feel proud of.

There’s a danger that we get used to living in the dark – our eyes accustom to it and it becomes easier to focus solely on the things of darkness. We adjust our horizons accordingly. And yet ‘the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.’ ‘Those who lived in a land of deep darkness ... on them light has shined.’

‘Still, silent body
But within my spirit sings
Dancing in love-light’

Eight months ago a young wife and mother, Abigail Witchalls, was stabbed while walking in a country lane near her home in Surrey with her two year-old son. The attack left her severely paralysed and with her life in danger. But within a few weeks she had dictated that poem, a haiku really, by blinking out each letter – that being the only part of her that she could move. It was to give immense encouragement to her family.

‘Still, silent body
But within my spirit sings
Dancing in love-light’.

Here was not the world’s more usual triumph of strength and power but one of vulnerability and love. The flick of a fish’s tail in the darkness?.

This weekend our focus is drawn away from London or Surrey or wherever we may live, towards a very small country in the Middle East, yet one that arouses intense feelings and feverish media coverage, even though it’s not an oil producer.

Let's travel, in our minds, to Hebron, one of the oldest towns in Palestine, regarded as holy because, by tradition, the patriarch Abraham was buried there and, 3,000 years ago, David established his kingdom there. But there's been little of apparent holiness in Hebron for a long time. It's a town on the West Bank that's been living under occupation. Jewish settlements were built on confiscated Palestinian land and occupied by some fairly determined and fanatical people, forming a stranglehold round the city.

As a result of the Oslo peace talks in the 1990's Hebron was divided into Israeli and Palestinian controlled areas. It's the only West Bank city with a Jewish community living in the middle of a Palestinian majority. About a third of the Palestinians ended up in Israeli controlled sectors. Many have had to abandon their homes because of violence from the settlers. Most of the shops in the Old City are now closed – a once lively place turned to a ghost town. Palestinian children are regularly attacked on their way to school by the children of settlers who throw stones and shout abuse at them. A place of darkness – a seemingly Godless place.

Most of us, if we're honest, will have found it hard at times to see particular groups of people as fellow human beings. It complicates things for us if we see their humanity – if we discover that they're people we can talk to.

But, since September, groups of young Israelis have been travelling to Hebron to observe how some of their fellow countrymen and women have been treating the Palestinians – and their eyes have been opened. This is a brave thing to do. Michel, a biologist from Jerusalem said 'I was quite afraid to come here and wanted to know if we would be properly protected. I hoped the soldiers would protect us from Palestinian terrorists but then I discovered that the violence is actually from the settlers and the army and the police allow it to go on.' Now, these observers 'do shifts' as they call it, showing solidarity with their Arab neighbours by seeing the children safely to and from school. A glimpse of light in the darkness – a flick of the fish's tail?

Bethlehem is a place of considerable darkness today. For a long time now it's been a grey and dark town, starved of funds, under military occupation and often under curfew. Since last month it's been fully encircled by the completion of the walls and fences of what's become known as 'The Wall of Separation'. Visitor numbers have dropped to almost nothing and the 2,000 years of uninterrupted Christian presence in the town could soon end as people feel the pressure to leave.

But there was also a dark and murky side to the stories of the birth of Christ in that town. The Gospels that relate the story of the nativity speak also of the dictates of the occupying power 'In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.' Augustus was the Roman ruler at the time when Jesus was born in what was a province of the Roman Empire.

The Gospels also speak of poverty and fear and, in the story of the massacre of the innocents, of appalling violence. The story of Christ's birth is as much for our generation as it was for his own and the connections are there – possibly more recognisable now than they have been for some time.

Into that dark world, and into our world of darkness appeared the grace of God. 'And this will be a sign for you' the angel says to the shepherds 'an infant in a manger.' Grace has appeared on earth but it's not entirely simple to observe it immediately. We could almost say it's not visible to the naked eye. But the sign, like the star, which was to lead to the wise men, would be the infant in the manger. We often need help to recognise God's grace working – both visible and hidden – in our lives and in the world.

Pope Benedict, speaking on World Youth Day last summer, talked of the Wise Men who knew that the world was in disorder and who were troubled. They looked for the King, at first in a palace – the house of Herod, but they had to adjust their ideas. The new King to whom they came to pay homage was not as they had been expecting. They had to learn that God isn't usually as we may imagine him to be. They had to change their ideas about power, about God, about humanity and about themselves.

Power and glory is a theme we've been looking at throughout Advent – our Advent booklet this year opened with the words ' In everyday life, concepts of power and glory seem to have lost their value, so that we now frequently regard them with suspicion, even cynicism. There is some justification for this. We see power abused by those who have it and glory often treated as just another world for fame.'

And yet power and glory are both Godly words and so, perhaps painfully, we need to unlearn our mistaken ideas about their real meaning so that we can learn, from that child, born in a manger, into a murky and dark world, something of the Christly meaning of power and glory, love and service so that the light may shine through us and we might, perhaps, be used by God as the flick of a fish's tail for others.