

Time, Light, Truth and Christmas Hope

‘Respair’ is a very old word that one hardly ever uses these days. The opposite of ‘despair’, ‘to respair’ is to have fresh hope, and to move beyond the gloom of desolation and despondency, and have faith in the future. Despair is to see no light at the end of the tunnel. Or, if you do happen to glimpse a twinkling light in the distance, it is the proverbial train hurtling towards you – so time to run and hide.

Hope may be one of the most important virtues humanity has. It believes in better, so does not despair of the present (though some exasperation is normal and perfectly permissible!). Hope can maintain relationships in rocky times. It raises our children, and educates them. Hope does not give up. It wants the best for others. It is deeply rooted in God’s grace and goodness. It is turned towards a greater light and the promise of our best for all individuals, communities and countries being realised. And their best for you. It yearns, as we all do, for justice, integrity, peace, truth and kindness to flourish.

One of the most obvious things to say about light is that it helps us to see – and differently too. Often, more light on a situation is illuminating. The darkness is exposed and scattered. For this reason, I love this verse of a well-known carol:

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

These lights are small, but they shine. They stand against the fears and darkness. It is a sign of true hope. The very first words that God utters in the scriptures (*Genesis*) link to some of the very last words (*Revelation*):

God said, “Let there be light” (*Genesis* 1: 3, RNJB).

[The Eternal City] “...has no need of sun or moon to give it light, for the Glory of God its light...the nations will walk in its light... (the city) gates will never be closed...and there will be no more night; they will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will be their light...” (*Revelation* 21 & 22, RNJB)

It is into the darkness and the formless chaos that God first speaks – and light appears. Light is the first thing in these opening verses of the scriptures that God declares to be “good”. In a world where much tragedy brings darkness, and where much sin lingers in the shadows, we need to be reminded that the light God speaks into existence is “good”. It is that constant reminder, in our everyday lives, of the utter goodness, provision and love of God’s creative work. The gifts and goodness of God are ever-flowing.

Christmas, with the birth of the Christ-child, is a speck of light that pours out across the universe to speak of God's abundant life. We are all invited to share this. As God abides with us, so we are invited to share night stars, twinkling street lights and bright-lit stable of Bethlehem. Every new day begins with a sunrise. Light comes. Life comes. God sees this, and God says "it is good".

Christmas used to be a twelve-day festival that began late on Christmas Eve, and ended at Epiphany. These days, it seems to begin in late November, ending on Boxing Day. Yet no matter how weeks Christmas may seem, it often seems there is not enough time – for family or friends, or cooking and preparing.

Our language about time is revealing. We have "demands" on our time. We "make time" for people we want to see. People "buy" time or "spend" time. We "invest" time or "put time aside". We have "quality" time and "wasted" time. We hate to lose "precious" time. Time, like me, is a little too short.

Time is also testing. None more so than at present. So what does the future hold for us, for our world and our country? For our planet and all it faces? We live in interesting times – an Age of Anxiety, you might say. This is a time that makes many of us apprehensive – even fearful. Familiar foundations and stable moorings seem uncertain, and the future gloomy.

In our turbulent world, we can seem to stand at a threshold that poses challenges that are seemingly hard to see any way through. This is a time like no other. And yet the promise of the Christmas message is one of gift and hope.

So the John's gospel speaks of light in the darkness, and of God 'abiding' with us. God, in Christ, comes to dwell *with* us. The hope of the gospel is that God gives himself to us. God has made his home with us.

Christmas Time is a true gift. A gift to you and me; a gift to be shared. And God, in God's wisdom, asks us to use this gift wisely. Prayerfully, carefully, joyfully, abundantly, generously – as God in Christ spent time with others.

'The Gate of the Year' is the popular name given to a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins. King George VI quoted the poem in his 1939 Christmas broadcast in the early and dark days of the Second World War, eighty years ago:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.

God is Emmanuel. God is with us. God is with us in our times. Even when it may all seem dark and hopeless, the Light of the World has come. Here, we often turn to a very short prayer at this time of year:

“We pray for joy in our hearts, hope in our God, love to forgive, and peace upon the earth. In the name of Jesus Christ Amen.”

In a world where even now, and in so many places, darkness overwhelms households, communities, nations and lives, we yearn for the coming of light. Beyond the global challenges, our own lives also cry out for light – those places and circumstances in our lives where darkness has overshadowed us, and light seems far, far way. An end to restrictions, impositions, isolation and marginalisation. An end to loneliness and suffering. An end to abuse and the shame and pain it brings. An end to wars, to injustice, to suffering, to poverty, to hunger. An end to darkness.

John’s gospel does not begin with the traditional Christmas stories. Instead, John starts with the eternal story of God breaking in, with light, to our world and our lives. John reminds us – with words that need to constantly ring from our hearts and our lips in faith and protest – that though our world is wounded, God has spoken:

“Light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it” (John 1: 5, RNJB).

That word “Overpower” is rendered differently in other translations of John’s *Prologue*. Older versions have “comprehend”, or “overwhelm”. The sense of the Greek, however, is that the darkness cannot “grasp” the light. It just doesn’t understand it. In modern idiom: “it doesn’t get it”.

The darkness of evil, iniquity and wickedness cannot understand light. Our politicians, and sometimes even church leaders, when they speak in half-truths they know they speak in half-lies. Misleading, covering up, refusing transparency and humane accountability, sweeping things under the carpet: these are all the works of darkness. But God lifts the lid, and speaks the light into these dark places and the nooks and crannies that cringe from exposure. Because God is the source of all light and life, the darkness will not overpower us.

John tells us that in the birth of Jesus, God has entered into creation afresh – repair – to bring light and life to all. As John puts it: “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world”. (*John* 1: 9, RNJB)

As we look across God’s creation this Christmas, our task in this New Year that lies before us is to affirm with God all that is good. Wherever darkness threatens to overpower us, whether in the lives of others, or in our own lives, let us remember that God has spoken the very first words in creation: “Let there be light...and God saw it was good”. God’s reign of light, love, grace, justice and mercy cannot overcome by the darkness. And best of all, at Christmas, we remember that God chooses to come to us and to abide with us, to dispel the darkness. Christmas is but one day. But God’s light is for each and every day throughout the year.

As you receive that light this Christmastide, be sure to share it and bring the same light to others. And share your time as generously as you can, as God always chooses to do with us. Emma Percy’s Christmas poem ‘Truth Was Given’ takes us into the days that stretch before us. May God bless you and keep you – this Christmastide and always.

Truth was given,
A thing of beauty, soaring up on sunlit wings
Sweeping down to rest in my hands,
But this, I am told, is a no fly zone.
Here truth must be contained,
the status quo maintained.
Words must stay unspoken
bonds must not be broken,
certainties kept unshaken,
liberties not taken.
So I contained the truth.
At night she flew around my room keeping me from sleep
In the day, held close, she beat against my heart
and flew into my mouth longing to be free.
It hurts to be restrained,
for hope to be detained.
Truth should be outspoken,
the bars that bind, broken.
Complacency shaken
initiatives taken.
For the truth shall set you free
when truth herself is freed
and the uncaged bird allowed to sing.