

Back in the 9th century BC, in a time of great national and international uncertainty in the Middle East, the Prophet Isaiah declared:

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned. *Isaiah 9:1,2*

In Old Testament thought, darkness is synonymous with an absence of God, of hope, of future. In contrast, light is associated with life, with health, with salvation. So even in Judah's darkest hour, the prophet points to hope. As he continues:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,

He speaks of a future Messianic king; the arrival of this child is, as in any family, is to be a sign of future, a source of hope.

These words coming as they do, at the beginning of one of the passages appointed to be read on Christmas Day, have a resonance with our present situation.

'A people walking in darkness'

Standing as we are at the end of 2020, we are aware of a great darkness that has hung over us in the form of the Covid 19 Pandemic; this Christmas, a Christmas like no other we have ever experienced, is but one aspect of the effect it has had on all levels of society. We think of those who have suffered as a result through sickness and bereavement. Our community and business life, school and college life, Church life, personal life have all suffered.

Darkness of any sort heightens our sense of fear, not knowing what is out there in the darkness. Whatever precautions we take, there is still that uncertainty. With lockdown, has come loss of contact with family and friends, we are

unable to take part in our usual activities – sports, choirs, bridge clubs, youth clubs, simple spontaneous social gatherings have all been affected. Those living alone have felt increasingly isolated. The effects of all this will be felt for some time to come.

But, even in the midst of the darkness, there has been light. I think of the work of all sectors of our health services who have done magnificent work, some at considerable cost to their own health and wellbeing. Talking to people in the Parish who have been isolated, I have been struck by how many have remarked on the kindness of neighbours and fellow members of the Parish who have been in touch, who have offered help, who have offered the simple gift of time and a listening ear.

Each year, at this service, we read those lovely words that form the opening of John's Gospel

³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ⁴What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The light shines in the darkness

As I said earlier, in the Old Testament, darkness is synonymous with absence of God, of hope, of future. I think one of the cruellest aspects of the current pandemic is that it has undermined hope; our simplest plans for the future have to be made in the knowledge that events may overtake us. And people are alone this Christmas who never thought that they would be alone; that may be due to bereavement, sickness or just the latest restrictions.

Uncertainty undermines not just future but also hope. So many in the business and hospitality sector worked through the first lockdown earlier in the year in the hope that their efforts and their sacrifices would overcome the threat of this

virus. The second – and possibly third – lockdown is proving far more difficult not just in business terms but is taking its toll on emotional and mental wellbeing. Hope is a fragile plant that we must all strive to keep alive.

In times of darkness, our vision, our confidence in God can be undermined. We find ourselves asking, ‘Does God not see, does God not notice, does God even care?’ This is where the words of this Christmas Gospel really speak to me at this time.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The message of Christmas, the message of the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God coming among us in the person of Jesus is that God does see, God does really care. In the person of Jesus, God has experienced what it is like to be human, what it is to be me, to be you; what it is to hope, to fear, to laugh, to cry. He knows, really knows, what it is to know loneliness, to be let down; what it is to die – and in his resurrection to triumph over it all.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

God is with us, God remains with us, God will stay with us.

‘I am with you always – to the very end of time.’

Even this pandemic that has overshadowed us this year, will pass. The time is coming, and coming soon, when we will be able to hug our friends and loved ones again, when we will see the smiles that are now hidden behind the masks. In the meantime, stay safe, keep everyone around you safe – and have a Happy and Blessed Christmas.