

‘The voice of the Lord splits the flash of lightning’ *Psalm 29*

Have you ever watched a lightning storm? I don’t mean just the odd flash of lightning I mean a full blown thunder storm. The psalmist must have been thinking about something like that when he penned these words we have sung in Psalm 29.

I recall during our time in Mountmellick there was a storm one night that went on for several hours – Rachel and I sat with Anthony and we just marvelled at the sheer scale of it. The following day I spoke to a resident of Clonaslee who told me of seeing the lightning striking the spire of St Manman’s (the C of I Church in the village). He spoke of seeing the lightning strike and then watching as a ball of ionised gas, about the size of a football, slowly moved down the lightning conductor to the ground. I went across to the Church to look at any damage. The spire was intact (it is good to know that a lightning conductor works!) but when I went inside I discovered that the fuse box had been blown across the width of the Church.

There is incredible power in a lightning strike, which is a giant discharge of electricity. The spark can be up to 8 kilometres in length, involving a voltage of up to 100 million volts and the air in the spark can reach a temperature of up to 27 000 °C. There is something primeval about that sort of power that calls to mind the forces at the very heart of creation. The words of this Psalm 29 summon up images of the awesome powers of nature - the flash of lightning, the shaking of the desert, the writhing of the oak trees. As such this psalm itself picks up the theme of our first lesson, the opening verses of the book

Genesis, in which the writer reflects on the very beginnings of creation. Maybe because it is because we are only reading a small portion in our service – but what really came through to me as I read through the lessons was that the first act of creation was not the moon and the stars, not the plants, the fish or anything else. The first act of creation was a separation of light and darkness.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

In our Gospel reading we read Mark’s account of the arrival of Jesus on the scene, with his Baptism by John in the river Jordan. The writer of the 4th Gospel, in that wonderful Prologue we read each Christmas, speaks of Jesus in terms of light.

What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. *John 1:4-5*

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. This week, in the events that unfolded in Paris, darkness seemed to descend on the city of Paris as those who claimed to speak in the name of faith, wrecked havoc in the brutal murder of journalists, police officers and hostages. We are left asking what has faith to say in the face of all this?

I begin my thoughts with an image that has seemed to characterise the response of the French people themselves. On the evening of the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo crowds assembled in the Place de la Republique, standing in silence holding pens in the air. In this apparently futile gesture there was a

fierce defiance in their assertion of their values of free expression that was not going to be cowed by acts of violence.

I go back to the image of light, the power of light. Think of light travelling through the deepest regions of darkest space that we see as the stars in the night sky. Any of us who have tried to darken a room, know only too well how difficult it is to block out. It is light, not darkness, that makes the lasting image on a photographic plate.

Those pens raised against the Paris skyline should encourage us in our confidence in the power of the light of the Gospel of Christ. As I so often do I find myself going back to the words of Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi:

And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. *Philippians 2:8-11*

I am reminded that the Gospel was forged not in force of arms or acts of violence but in an act of self emptying, humble submission. That message has withstood the ravages of persecution, of apostasy, of human savagery and failure. As Paul reminded the Church at Rome:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

^{Ro 8:37} No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Rom 8*

I go back to that image of the pens raised in defiance against the Paris skyline.

What are the pens that we are to raise in the face of darkness and violence in this world? It is first and foremost the light of the gospel of Christ. It is truth spoken with integrity in the face of injustice, of violence, of oppression, of suffering. The pen raised in defiance to the Paris sky reminds me that in our speech, in our action, in our attitudes we must remain true to our own principles, our own core values. So in our dealings with the broader Muslim community in our midst, there must be no room for intolerance, for prejudice – for that would be to deny our own fundamental values.

There must also be a re-affirmation in our own lives of the values we profess to maintain as a society. In Ireland we lay claim to a long heritage as a Christian society – and yet the values of the Gospel are all too often betrayed in the attitudes and priorities that are set in our private life, our political life, in our business and corporate life, in which wealth and power are sought at the expense of those on the margins of our society, the old, the sick, the disadvantaged. We need as a society to rediscover, to re-affirm the values that have sustained us and inspired us in the past; to rediscover the power and vitality of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we can stand firm and

confident in the face of anything that may threaten to undermine our society, whether it be dishonesty, the immorality and corruption in our public and business life or those darker forces, professing to be motivated by faith, that brook no opposition or disagreement with their own particular twisted and distorted world view.

In the face of darkness, it is all too easy to lose hope, lose confidence in who we are, what we are. I have on my computer a file containing snippets, inspirational pieces I refer to from time to time. One of them is the prayer that was found on the body of a child at the Ravensbrook concentration camp when it was liberated by the Allies at the end of the last War.

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the sufferings they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering; our comradeship, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this; and when they come to judgement let all the fruits we have born be their forgiveness.

The forces that built Ravensbrook, who brought their own darkness over the world in their day, believed themselves to be all powerful. All that is left of them are the ruins of the camps and the museums that record their brutality. The spirit behind the prayer of that child lives on and will never, ever die.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.