

Christmas Midnight 2020 Pusey House
Hope born in and shaped by disappointment.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

These words from St John the theologian and evangelist, the one who sees God and communicates what he sees, are among the best known of the Gospels. Here the KJV follows closely the Latin which translates the Greek verb κατέλαβεν here to mean that the darkness did not comprehend the light. There would be much to probe and consider in this rendering: much to ponder about a gift to the world which we cannot hold, a gift we cannot even grasp with our minds. But tonight I'd like to focus instead on the translation generally put forward since 19th c and Brooke Foss Westcott: the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

the darkness has not overcome it

This year many people have been worn down by the struggle with the virus. There has been a lot of darkness, and this had had not only terrible financial costs but also emotional and spiritual ones. Not only has life and health been threatened and for many lost, but many of the goods which are intrinsic to the good and joy of life have been challenged – the possibility of being together, enjoying leisure or sporting activities together, even communal worship has been disrupted, people have been kept apart from family, and education has been made more difficult and for some radically impoverished. People we know, perhaps we ourselves, will be mourning loved ones, a father or mother who has died, or a close friend. For some the virus has brought long and lonely periods of shielding. Some people have lost jobs and may be looking at big financial challenges. For some, on-line education has been distressing and a great disappointment. More recently, the hopes many had for getting together with family or friends, an easing of restrictions, has been taken away. Disappointed hope is especially hard to bear. Sometimes it is the little things which seem all too much: one more cancellation, one more delay, carrots substituted for parsnips. The little things can seem to represent all the strain and disappointment of the last months summed up.

And yet, the message of the Gospel is not wishful thinking, it is not cheap promises, false optimism: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The birth which overflows in the song of the Angels, Glory be to God on high, the birth which unites heaven and earth in a single peace, this wondrous birth is manifest to the world precisely in the midst of disappointment, loss, corruption, and even murder. Glory be to God on high, and on earth, peace among men, is a song sung in the midst of disappointment and tragedy. The angel's song is one which transforms and redeems this suffering and tragedy.

There was no room at the inn, no place for Mary and Joseph and the new born King. This 'no room', no place, is a symbol of there being no place in the world for Christ

when he comes. This, we know, continues to be a challenge for us – is there place in our lives when Christ comes? Is there place now, today? Will there be place tomorrow? There is never a convenient time – our Lord comes, wrapped in swaddling clothes, meek and lowly, when something else is calling us. We always have to give up something of the world for him. His time is not ordered to fit easily with our time. If it were, He would not bring salvation, but more of the same.

For the holy family, there is no room in the inn. They may have borne this trial with patience and hope.¹ For us, no room at the inn looks like disappointment.

Then there is the trip to Bethlehem. Again, for our Lord's mother and for St Joseph, following what they know of God's purposes for them, it is hard to imagine that they would have been happy to need to make the long journey, Caesar decreed, perhaps without much warning, that all the Roman world would be taxed: 90 miles, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. No longer able to look forward to a birth in their home town, surround by people and helps they knew, St Joseph and the Mother of our Lord had to set out on a hard journey in deep winter. In the decree from Caesar, we see the world political power, the world of taxes, tiers, and regulations. More disappointment.

Finally, even before the trip to Bethlehem, the promised birth brought a great trial for St Joseph. When he learned that his betrothed was with child, but not by him, there must have been great disappointment. As it had for Mary, the visit of angel changed everything – *Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost*. Joseph became the protector of the Saviour and his mother, this was his version of 'be it unto me according to thy word'. But this transformation begins in what looks like disappointment, broken promises, – and in that place of disappointed dreams, the Lord speaks to Joseph.

These trials are not just incidental details that could be modified to give a different version of Christmas story. All the hope which the birth of the Christ-child brings, all the gifts and graces which are the means by which he comes to us, by which he makes us partakers of his divine life, the transformation of our lives and the world which flow from this beginning, all of the wonder and joy is shaped by the disappoints, trials, and frustrations which the gracious Lord both permits and transforms.

The Christ-child and his gifts have not been lost to us in the trials of the past months, however much we have suffered or felt the strain of what is happening.

This promise becomes even more pointed and powerful if we consider the days to come. Tomorrow the Church commemorates St Stephen, the First Martyr. Then, after keeping the festival of St John the Evangelist on Sunday, Monday is Holy innocents Day. Part of the gift of the nativity is the affirmation that no human evil, however terrible, defeats Gods loving purposes. In his rage Herod orders the death of these helpless children in a bid to protect his corrupt power. But Herod could not separate these children from the love of Christ which conquers death. The word made flesh embraced these little children with the arms stretched wide on the cross even before, born in Bethlehem, he was capable of walking or talking. It is difficult to speak about these deaths so briefly,

¹ (as St Mary and St Joseph were being trained to discern the sweet and strong work of providence in what was unfolding for them).

but the affirmation is the same: : the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We all must know that we are destined for a love which is greater than we can be given in this world.

The trials and tribulations of this last year do not overcome the light of Christ in the world or in our lives. If we are able to surrender ourselves to the shape which his life takes in the troublesome conditions in this world, we can be confident that the babe born in Bethlehem will grow in wisdom and stature in us and in his people. The problems and trials we face, however sharp, will not prevent the gifts and graces which he gives from growing up in us. Knowing that the darkness does not overcome the light of Christ does not take away our problems. But this confidence does anchor our feet in a hope which does not disappoint as we address and face these problems. Christ was born in the midst of messiness and struggle. We can expect him to be present as light in the midst of our struggles.²

The world in which the virus has emerged and threatened us is the world which is created and sustained by the Word of God. Nothing which exists falls outside of his wisdom, power, and good purposes.

Tonight I will conclude with my favourite Christmas sermon by Dr Pusey, which communicates the confidence we have of God with us in the midst of trial and disappointment:

...if He have been thus ‘God with us,’ and purposes that we should be thus ‘with God,’ if He have so taken our poor nature into Himself, that in Him it is In-Godded, Deitate and we, if we be truly His Members, are parts of Him, Who is One with God, how should He not be ‘with us’ now in all things, if we be His? What but sin can hide His Face from us, in that it blinds our eyes that we see Him not? He, Whose gifts and calling are without repentance came not at this time, to be with us, again wholly to leave us, that we should be without Him. He left us, but to be closer to us; He left us in Bodily Presence, but to be present still more nearly in Spirit; not without us any longer, as Teacher, Guide, Comforter, but, through that other Comforter, within us; withdrawn from our bodily sight, to fill our souls ; no longer to be touched or handled by our hands, that His Spirit might be made manifest to our spirit, that we might touch Him with the hands of our heart, feed on Him with the cravings of our spirit, see Him with the eyes of our mind, be enlarged to receive Him, and, being expanded, be filled with Him, and be ‘one with Him and He with us.’ [In-Godded, Deitate].³

² This affirmation makes sense because we know that the little baby born in Bethlehem was not just any baby, however precious, however meant for eternity. The word who takes on flesh and is born in Bethlehem is the brightness of God the Father’s glory, ‘by whom also he made the worlds ... the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power’. St John describes the Son of God as the Word, the Logos, the Reason of God who is God.

The world in which the virus has emerged and threatened us is the world which the Word of God who remained with the Father even when he was born has made and upholds. Nothing which exists falls outside of his wisdom and power. God who is described here is not an impersonal power. God is a person. Beside the fullness and richness of this personhood, we are all flat characters. His unites the intimate details of human life with the wisdom and power which animates and orders all things. There is no limit to what we may discover and know as we come to know and love him.

³ Pusey, Parochial Sermons, vol 1. ‘God with us’, Christmas. Sermon IV.