

Address – Christmas Eve 2021
'Everlasting Light'

Luke 2:1-20

John 1:1-14

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it...
The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”
(John 1:5,9)

I was in Edinburgh city centre last Friday night and I looked up the Mound and the beautiful 20-metre Christmas tree, the annual gift of the people of Norway in gratitude for the refuge given to Norwegians during the Second World War its white lights in sharp focus against the looming presence of the dark towers of New College where once I studied. On the other side of Princes Street Gardens the Christmas Market was in full swing, the fairground also lit with brightly coloured lights but somehow the Christmas tree stood serenely pointing into the darkness of the frosty night sky.

Perhaps in the time we share here tonight we can put the more frenetic aspects of the Christmas season to one side and share in a few moments of serenity as we too gaze heavenwards and ponder.

The Bible opens with the declaration: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen.1:1) What that means, if it is true, is that before ever anything existed, God was, and out of nothing He brought everything. “Let there be light,” God says, “and there *is* light. And there is evening and there is morning, the first day.” (Gen.1:3,5) Astonishing! And all the more so when you read on and discover that it is not until day four that the sun makes an appearance. By the decree of God light itself exists in the world before any of the physical sources of light that we are so obviously dependent on come into being.

In the closing chapter of the Bible we also read about light: “There will be no more night [but] they will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun for the Lord God will give them light.” (Rev.22:5) What that means, if it is true, is that just as light *preceded* the creation of the sun and will *outlast* it when the sun shines no more, so God Himself is the author and the source of the everlasting light that I take for our theme tonight.

Most of us do not really know what true darkness is. Few of us have ever found ourselves in a situation where there is no light at all, far away from

street-lights on a starless evening when you cannot even see your hand in front of your face. And even if we have been in such a place we will have had some form of artificial light with us to chase away the darkness. If a light shines in the darkness it overcomes that darkness and no matter how all-pervasive the darkness, even a chink of light can banish it.

We read tonight from the opening of John's Gospel, a passage that very consciously echoes the account of creation I referred to a few moments ago. It is here that John begins his account of the life of Jesus, not in the manger in Bethlehem but in the beginning of all things – He is with God and He *is* God and through Him all things come to be. Without Him nothing was made that has been made. He is eternal life and He is everlasting light and yet He is coming into the world. In sharp contrast to the lowliness of Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, John's description of the coming of Christ is cosmic in its scope, but we need both.

Just as we need the sun to enable us to experience the everlasting light of God, so we need the Word of God made flesh, we need the Son of God to become the son of Mary if we are to begin to comprehend the reality of God with us.

All of us know the reality of the darkness of the night, especially at this time of year, but we also all know and experience a deeper darkness at different seasons of our lives – we suffer through illness or accident or bereavement or injustice or depression or even a succession or a combination of all these things. Sometimes it may even seem that the darkness is everywhere, with hardship and anxiety piling upon us or on others close to us, and not the slightest chink of light or hope to be seen anywhere. Perhaps for more than most these past nearly two years have been a very hard and a dark time. Some have been in very dark places and some may even now feel the darkness to be all-pervasive and unstoppable.

But the message of the incarnation, the coming of God Almighty into the world in Christ, that I have the privilege of proclaiming to you as we prepare to welcome Christmas Day is that there is a light shining in the darkness which the darkness cannot, simply *cannot* overcome.

Think of the situation into which Jesus was born. How dark things must have been for Mary, far from home and without even a bed for the night never mind somewhere appropriate to give birth, with nothing but strips of

cloth with which to wrap her tiny newborn. How dark things must have been for the shepherds – they were little more than night watchmen, working antisocial hours for what was probably a pittance of a wage, facing the real dangers of sheep rustlers and wild animals with none of the satisfaction of really rearing the lambs. They were in dead-end jobs, working while others slept and with only each other for company. How dark things must have been for the whole people of Israel, their days of glory long behind them with little to be proud of as a nation, little to hope for in the immediate future, living under Roman occupation with no control over their own destiny.

Into *that* darkness God came in Jesus Christ – into that space where there was nothing better than a feeding trough to cradle the newborn, into the lives of two newly-weds who were expecting a baby that was not the husband's, into the lives of those night-time shepherd nobodies, into the land of Israel at one of the very lowest ebbs of its history – God from God, Light from light, all the spoken and written promises of God made flesh to be encountered face to face. And wherever there is such darkness today God still comes in Christ, the Light of the World. As we sang, “Where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

Of course, not all who encountered Jesus in Bethlehem or later in His life were willing to receive Him. Just as we turn our eyes away from a bright light if we have grown too used to the darkness, so many turned their backs on Christ in His lifetime and the same is true today – many of us actually prefer the darkness because it is comfortably familiar instead of being willing to step into the brightness of the transforming light He brings.

Perhaps the bright lights of Christmas can actually distract us from the deeper light that comes into the world in Christ and perhaps we need to pause again to take stock of the harsh reality of darkness in the life of the world and all who live in it and the transforming reality of what that everlasting light is. Though the world was made through Christ the world did not recognise Him and though Christ comes to us still, too often we will not receive Him. Tonight, we gather as it were in the stable, the very gate of heaven. Perhaps it seems that only the merest chink of candlelight is shining, but it is pointing to Christ. Whoever will receive Him, whoever will put their trust in Jesus the Son of God – to you He will give a second

birth, a new start, fulness of life and that light that whatever darkness may threaten to surround you simply cannot overcome.