

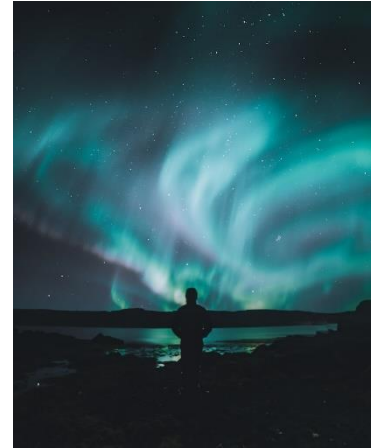
## WEY VALLEY – WEEKLY CIRCUIT LETTER JANUARY 2023

Barrie Tabraham

### *‘Deep but Dazzling Darkness’*

Dear friends,

We are now truly in the depths of winter! As I write this, everything seems to be frozen – the car’s windscreen, the water in the can outside our back door, my fingers . . . And, of course, the darkness that accompanies the short days gives this time of the year its special character, though nothing like that of the folk of Skellefteå in northern Sweden, where one of our daughters-in-law’s parents live and where, in January, daylight lasts just a few hours.



You won’t need me to tell you that the word **‘darkness’** can have a number of different connotations. Darkness has long been used as synonym for sadness, pain, tragedy, and even evil. Some of you may remember that, as children you were ‘afraid of the dark’. We call a foolish act as ‘a leap in the dark’, and the period in history following the disintegration of the Roman Empire was referred to as ‘the Dark Ages’. By contrast, the explosion of rational scientific enquiry of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was called ‘The Enlightenment’, and ‘light’ by association, has suggested truth and progress in contrast to darkness, which symbolizes ignorance, despair and so on.

How then, as we begin another year with, I have to say, a great deal of trepidation, given the multiplicity of problems that we as a country are facing, does this affect our view of God? **Is God to be found only in light?** It’s true that there are plenty of examples of this to be found in the Bible, e.g. in John’s 1<sup>st</sup> letter, where he proclaims that ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ (I John 1:5). But unless we delve deeper into the nature of the divine mystery, and explore the subtleties of the imagery we find in Scripture, we may be in danger of appearing to be theologically naïve – and those both within and outside of the Church who look to us to read the signs of the times, as it were, will not thank us! We have to resolve the tension between our picture of God as the source of all light, with the reality of the suffering that we see all around us.

But the reality of God’s presence in darkness *is* indeed there in the Bible, even if it’s not always obvious. One of the great theologians of the Early Church, **Gregory of Nyssa**, reflected on Moses’ encounters with God. Moses’ first crucial meeting was when his attention was caught by the light of a burning bush. However, Gregory reminds us that when Moses ascended the mountain and received the ten commandments, he ‘drew next to the thick *darkness* where God was.’ (Exodus 20:21 – *my italics*). For Gregory, this was an image of an emptiness that only God can fill.



Most Christians mark the feast of **Epiphany** on 6<sup>th</sup> January, when we celebrate the light which came into the world. But the story goes on, after the Magi return to their homes, when we read in Matthew 2:13-18 of the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem and that our Lord himself was a refugee, or a ‘displaced person’, to use a modern euphemism. We are reminded that God is to be found not only in the context of a light and warm stable, but also in the dark, tragic homes in Bethlehem.

This aspect of Christmas and the New Year, and the way in which we can revisit the twin themes of darkness and light, can help us make some sense of human suffering – perhaps even our own. People today need to hear an authentic gospel – that God is to be found in all human life – in its darkness, too. Towards the end of his Gospel, Matthew tells us that, at the time of the crucifixion, ‘darkness came over the whole land’ (27:45). And God in Christ was in the midst of that.

A little-known writer from the distant past has helped move my thinking on further in this respect. 400 years ago, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century poet **Henry Vaughan** reflected upon the story of Nicodemus visiting Jesus by night (John Ch. 3), and in his haunting poem, simply entitled “**The Night**”, he asks the reader in the very first verse to see how ‘light’ and ‘dark’ can be reinterpreted:

*Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.*

Then the poet goes on to describe the night as, paradoxically, *my soul’s calm retreat, which none disturb!* You can find the full text on the internet, but I found the last verse of “The Night” truly remarkable:

*There is in God – some say –  
A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that Night! where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim!*

Extraordinary words, which I hope will help you too. Yes. God is there in ‘dazzling darkness’. That is why he is Immanuel, God-with-us. And that is why this Immanuel is a real hope for a real world. So, may God bless you all throughout 2023.

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**A prayer of St Augustine:** ‘You are the light of minds that know you; the life of souls that love you; the strength of wills that serve you. Help us so to know you that we may truly love you; help us to love you that we may fully serve you, because in serving you we find perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ **Amen.**



*Barrie Tabraham*

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