

## Exodus 20:1-21

This is the night when we notice that we have put back the clocks. The morning was lighter (if you were up early enough to witness it) but now the night has come in before 6 p.m. and now we are reminded that winter is at hand.

Being a morning person I am always quite pleased when the clocks go back. Lately I have taken up the habit of going for a run first thing in the morning, something I used to do but certainly haven't since I had two children. I go off along the back road for a mile or so, then turn and come back. When I began doing this in August I would be running along in the 6.30 sunshine, watching the sun light spreading from the west to the eastern side of the valley. Then, as the days grew shorter, I was running in the sunrise, which was lovely. Then I was going out in the pale pre-dawn light and watching the sun turn the clouds golden as I turned and ran the homeward stretch. But lately I have been going out in the dark, and if I am lucky getting a faint glimmer of light to show me the way home. Since I have poor eyesight and very poor night sight, this running in the dark is a bit of an adventure for me, and I for one am looking forward to tomorrow morning when things shouldn't be quite so black - for the next week of two at least.

But most of us hate the dark nights, and many people feel depressed at the thought of the winter coming on. It seems a natural human instinct to prefer light to darkness. The day is the time when things are open and plain, straightforward and able to be coped with. The night is when things become shadowy and strange, when the fears we have pushed aside during the busy hours of light come back to haunt us. It is not surprising that our far-off ancestors peopled the world with nightmare creatures of the dark - bogey men and goblins and goolies and lang-legged beasts and things that go bump in the night.

“Good Lord,” they prayed, “Deliver us.”

## Exodus 20:1-21

Moses went where the people were afraid to go - into the thick darkness where God was. When I read this statement I sometimes wonder if we have lost the sense of mystery that should surround God. I know that Jesus came to make God known to us in a new way, so that the terror of him which so gripped the Israelites should not paralyse us. But surely we should never forget that there is mystery at the heart of God. There is more than we can know. Moses went near to the thick darkness where God was, and it was Moses who became God's mouthpiece. If more of the people had dared to go where he went, surely more of them would have understood, and more of them would have been able to take a lead in helping the people understand. If all of them had dared to go, then God's chosen people would have been able to fulfil their destiny and become a nation of priests for the world. But the fear of the unknown, the fear of the dark, had them in their grip, and Moses alone dared the unknown and received the blessing of meeting with God face to face.

Darkness is a gift of God, and darkness is a place where we can meet with him.

## Isaiah 45:1-7

This is a remarkable passage in the prophecy of Isaiah, where God is addressing the Persian King Cyrus, someone who has not grown up knowing about the one true God.

God introduces himself to Cyrus, whom he has chosen to be an instrument in his hand, and he says that he will prove himself to the King by giving him the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places. No one else knows the treasures of the dark, but God, for he made them. He finishes this personal introduction by saying, "*I am the Lord and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I, the Lord, do these things.*" (V:7) Darkness and light, weal and woe, the God we worship is the one who made all these things. At various times people have tried to make out that God is responsible only for what we experience as pleasant, and that anything else must be the creation of the devil. But to think that is to give the devil equal power with God, which is something the Bible never does. No, God created all things and God knows about the things of darkness and the times of woe as much as about the things of the light and the times of joy.

And there are dark times in any life. There are childish worries and fears - which are not helped because the grown-ups so often laugh at them, knowing them to be groundless. But the child doesn't know that.

And then there are the angst-ridden days of adolescence. I wasn't at the concert in the Town Hall last weekend, but Sandy tells me that there wasn't a cheerful song sung by the many young people who got up to show their talent. They were all sad songs about despair and loneliness, so he says. The teenagers, with their hormones and anxieties, haven't the experience of life to know that when things are sad, when things don't go as you had hoped, that there is still good in life and that the good will catch up with you soon. And so it can be a dark time.

One of the most unfair times of darkness that can come is post-natal depression, the baby blues, which can hit a woman just when everyone - including herself - expects her to be full of joy at the birth of a child. And we all know that depression can affect anyone in middle age or when the deprivations of growing elderly encroach on life. Truly there are times of darkness in any life, and no one is immune from them.

And God says that he makes the darkness. And Moses went into the darkness to meet with God. And how can it be that we too can find God in the darkness of our lives?

On Monday, when I was out running in the early morning dark, it was very dark indeed. The sky was overcast and there were no stars, no moon, and not a hint of the dawn to come. A couple to times my foot hit grass rather than the hard surface of the road. It was difficult for me to make out even the shapes of the trees by which I usually navigate in the dark. But once I got on the back road I knew that it lay straight before me. I knew that there were no potholes to worry about. I knew this, but I couldn't see it. All I had to do was to keep running and trust to what I knew. And it worked. I had my run, enjoyed the fresh air and exercise and got home safely, refreshed for the day. And as I ran I thought about the darkness of life.

We use our eyes to navigate our way through life, probably more than any other sense. When sight is denied us we panic, in case all is not as it was when we could see. So as we go through life, we trust our own good sense, we trust our instinct for what is wholesome and happy, we trust the God is leading and guiding us. But when these things fail us, when, despite our best efforts, all feels dark and hopeless, what then? Then it is that we are called to use the faith we have built up. Then God reminds us that nothing has changed, except how we feel. Good is still good and God is still God and he is still leading us and guiding us, even if we can no longer see or understand how. Then it is that we are called on to trust him, just as I had to trust the road and go on running in the dark, when I couldn't see my own feet,

let alone what they were standing on.

One of the things which Christians have borne witness to over the centuries, is that when we do this, not railing against the dark, but accepting it as God's good gift, as much a gift as the better times, then we can meet with God in a new and different way. Then when the day comes for us again - as surely it will - we find that we are changed and that our relationship with God has grown and deepened, in ways which could never otherwise have been possible. God made the dark and its secrets cannot be known unless we are prepared to accept them from his hand, as gifts which may be unwelcome at first, but which we trust that we can learn from.

And of course the darkness and mystery and need to trust are not the whole of the God whom we worship. Far from it. Jesus came to be the light of the world, to drive away the fear of the dark, to conquer the gaisties and goolies. It is because of him that we can trust that even when our darkness is so great that we cannot see our own feet, never mind the way forward, we re still in his hand. We trust that he sees us, clearly, as in a spotlight, and sees where we have come from, what we have gone through, all that we are currently enduring, and what lies ahead. Our task is to trust, to keep looking to Christ, even if at times we cannot find him, and to wait for him to come to us and lead us out of the darkness into the light of his new dawn.