

# ***LIGHT IN DARKNESS***

***A sermon preached at the Mint Methodist Church  
by the Minister Rev Andrew Sails  
on Sunday 11th December 2011 at 10.30 am***



***The light shines in the darkness...***

***John....came as a witness to testify concerning that light". (John 1:5-7)***

For the Biblical writers the world was often a very dark and dangerous place. If you were travelling you made sure you arrived by nightfall if you did not want to lose your way or fall amongst thieves. If you were a shepherd out on the hills you guarded the embers of your fire beneath a cloudy night sky - it not only gave you warmth but also protection from the wolves in the shadows beyond. And even in your own home, should the lamp blow out on a windy night, or should the widow discover that her stock of oil was exhausted as the evening drew on, then the onset of night could be a frightening thing.

And also the Biblical writers lived in a world which was often dark not only literally but also metaphorically - theirs was a dark world of Roman brutality, of medical ignorance, of sudden pain and violent death always potentially around the corner.

Of course today is very different from the Biblical age. We live in a world of physical light easily turn on-able and turn off-able -

it is very rare that you or I will find ourselves in pitch darkness.  
Even on the darkest night in most communities in our land  
there is artificial light everywhere--streetlights, car lights, shop signs.  
We rarely experience the disarming quietude of total darkness.

But of course, this misses the point.  
In every age we still know the long dark night of the soul.  
No number of neon lights and blazing shop windows can take away  
that darkness which invades the human soul in times of distress.  
We can still stumble in the darkness of sin and death and despair.

There's a hymn which used to be in our hymn books  
called "Thy Kingdom come, O Lord"  
Written by a Victorian Rural Dean from Hertfordshire,  
the original hymn - very popular in its time -  
made it very clear where darkness was to be found in the world -  
it was overseas on the "mission field" –  
In the words of the last stanza -

"O'er heathen lands afar, thick darkness broodeth yet:  
arise, O Morning Star, arise, and never set!"

The hymn has been omitted from "Singing the Faith",  
but those modern hymn books which have retained it  
have normally made a brief but crucial alteration, changing  
"O'er heathen lands afar, thick darkness broodeth yet"  
to the more inclusive  
"O'er lands both near and far, thick darkness broodeth yet"  
The darkness is not just over there - it is right here -

Stanley and Livingstone spoke of their travels in "darkest Africa" –  
it was quite deliberate that William Booth of the Salvation Army  
spoke of his mission to "Darkest England".

And the darkness is not there in the past - it is here in the present -

This year's annual British Social Attitudes Survey  
was published this week - it makes fairly grim reading -  
and not just because it shows a decline in religious affiliation.

In the words of one commentator this week

“Perhaps more worrying for Christians –  
and people of goodwill of all faiths and none –  
was the shift in attitude towards fellow-humans and the planet”

*(Ekklesia Website)*

The report found that

“People are gradually becoming more selfish and individualistic,  
less well-meaning towards the less fortunate, less trusting,  
and less aware of any sense of community or of responsibility towards it. “

*(The Tablet).*

O'er lands both near and far, thick darkness broodeth yet....

And the Gospel bids us buck the trend of selfish individualism  
and look for the needs of the whole world.

We are to proclaim the Good News of Christ the Light of the World,  
We are to become John the Baptists - bearing witness to the light,  
reflecting it through our lives into the dark world we inhabit.

On lands both near and far...

· The Methodist Church has asked us to mark today as Dalit Liberation Sunday.  
This Sunday - initiated by the Indian Council of Churches -  
is marked on the Sunday nearest to Human Rights Day (which was yesterday). It is a day wh

· Today is also a day when we have been asked by Iona to support the work  
of Global Xchange - an organization with whom Iona is going as a volunteer  
development worker work in Nigeria after Christmas. Please give generously as  
you leave - Pray for development works in Africa - and by extension pray for all  
those agencies in every land seeking to lift the needy out of poverty and despair.

We are called to be John the Baptists -  
to show not only in word but also in deed the love of God -  
that in him they may find light in darkness and hope in despair.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn was a child in Auschwitz.

Food was very very scarce, and the family had hardly anything to eat.

When it came to the Jewish feast of lights - Hannukkah - there were no candles to

light. So Hugo's father took their precious margarine ration and melted it down to make a Hanukkah candle. Hugo protested. His father said, 'My child, we know you can live three days without water. You can live three weeks without food. But you cannot live for three minutes without hope.' Live in hope."

That is the meaning of our advent candles - candles which perhaps -  
God forgive us - we light with thoughtless ease -  
they are symbols of God's light in a dark world,  
they are symbols of hope for all people.

As the old Chinese proverb puts it,  
it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Or in the words of the old Celtic Christian blessing

"May the blessed sunlight Shine upon you  
and warm your heart till it glows like a great peat fire,  
so that the stranger may come and warm himself at it,  
and also a friend,  
And may the light shine out of the eyes of you  
Like a candle set in the window of a house  
Bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm"

It isn't easy to be a John the Baptist -  
to live the light of Christ in the world -  
"Witnessing to the light" means all kinds of things -  
and it is more than just talking about it.  
A man in a dark room doesn't need an essay on light waves -  
he needs a light.

Witnessing to the light means reflecting God's glory in our lives,  
it means lighting the candle of our lives  
from the light of Christ that we too may burn for him.  
For we are not merely called to light a candle,  
we are called to be a candle.

And we all know that candles are vulnerable -  
like a candle in the wind -

and as they give out light they gradually expend themselves, burn down.

A pig and a hen are walking down a road.

The hen looks at the pig and says "Hey, why don't we open a restaurant?"

The pig looks back at the hen and says "Good idea, what shall we call it?"

The hen thinks about it and says "Why don't we call it *"Bacon and Eggs"?*"

"I don't think so" says the pig, "You'd just be making a contribution -  
I'd be making a commitment of quite another order"

.

To be a true John the Baptist involves total commitment -

Indeed John himself lost his life witnessing to the light.

We are all called in our different ways to give our lives

(through martyrdom or faithful living) to bring light to the world.

Sister Valsa John of Dumka was murdered last month in India  
because of her stand in support of her local Dalit community.

A candlelit vigil was held for her in New Delhi Sacred Heart Cathedral.

A candlelit vigil for one whose life was a candle in the darkness.

When in the 16th C, Ridley and Latimer were about to be

burnt at the stake for their faith, Hugh Latimer cried out

"Be of good comfort...Master Ridley;

we shall this day light such a candle,

by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

We are all called not merely to light a candle

but to be a candle in the wind -

a shining light of hope in our dark despairing world.

As a Church may we do so - trusting as we do so

(in the words of the young people's hymn)

that "whatever this life sends" Christ will "never leave our side"

And so a final word - appropriately from India -

It is a word of comfort for those who mourn,

and also a word of profound hope for all who look for God's coming.

Rabindanath Tagore said of death:

“Death is not extinguishing the light;  
it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.”

Let us welcome the light of Christ,  
Let us witness to that light and offer ourselves  
as lights in Christ’s name  
Meanwhile let us wait with sure and certain hope,  
for the end of night,  
and the final assured coming of God’s glorious dawn.

## **ORDER OF SERVICE**

**Sunday 11th December 2011 3rd Sunday of Advent**  
**10.30 a.m. Morning Worship led by Rev Andrew Sails**

### **Welcome and Notices**

**Hymn STF 165 “Advent Candles”** - *verses 1-4 then repeat verse 1*  
*(during the hymn three advent candles will be lit)*

### **Prayers**

**All Age Ministry - Maureen Coleman**

### **Hymn**

Lord we are always here  
Ready to follow you.  
We want to spread the word,  
And let all know you are true.

We trust in you to help  
And guide us in the way.  
And when the way is tough  
Please help us not to stray.

We trust in you alone  
Because we are best friends  
Please never leave our side  
Whatever this life sends.

© August 2011 - Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Cody, Taylor, Sophie, Alex

### **The Peace**

Leader: Let us share the peace

Adults: The peace of the Lord be with you

Children: And also with you

Leader: Go in peace

*[Young people leave for their own sessions]*

### **Introducing “Global Xchange”**

**Reading: Isa 9:2-6 (p.693) and John 1:1-9 (p.1063)**

**Hymn STF 59 “Shine, Jesus shine”**

**Sermon: “The Light”**

**Hymn STF 213 “O little town of Bethlehem”**

### **Collection**

**Prayers of Intercession with sung responses** *(please remain seated):*

Prayer

*All (sing):* Born in the night, Mary's Child,  
a long way from your home;  
coming in need, Mary's Child,  
born in a borrowed room.

Prayer

*All (sing):* Clear shining light, Mary's Child,  
your face lights up our way;  
light of the world, Mary's Child,  
dawn on our darkened day.

Prayer

*All (sing):* Truth of our life, Mary's Child,  
you tell us God is good;  
prove it is true, Mary's Child,  
go to your cross of wood.

Prayer

*All (sing):* Hope of the world, Mary's Child,  
you're coming soon to reign;  
King of the earth, Mary's Child,  
walk in our streets again.

Lord's Prayer

**Hymn 186 “Tell out, my soul”**

**Blessing**