

Matins, Christmas Day, 2022
Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 2:8-20
Father Christopher

There is in the reading we heard from St Luke's gospel a key character who goes unnamed, but who is central to this episode's *atmosphere* - and that character is the darkness. You might wish to add the light, but our little story of the shepherds begins in darkness and ends in darkness; and indeed, their visit to Mary and Joseph, and the '*babe lying in a manger*' is likely to have been in near-darkness too.

The only light in the story is brief, and that is the glory of the Lord, shining round about the angel and the heavenly host. The heavens open for a few moments, over the hillside, and then close again, before the shepherds make their way in haste to Bethlehem.

These days, and in our city, we need to work hard to imagine *real* darkness. That work is required of us however, to get the full impact of the story of Jesus's coming into our world. When was the last time you were away from all, or at least most, man-made light, and could really see – and I mean *really* see – the night sky?

I'm afraid for me - he says, lowering the tone, as is my wont - the last two times were while in hot tubs, two respective hot tubs I might add – while staying with friends in the country.

Things were not so comfortable for the shepherds of course – indeed the life of a shepherd was a cold and dangerous one.

But each time, after I had sunk into the hot water - and no doubt turned a lighter shade of pink as I was being *par-boiled*, and I relaxed, glass of whisky in hand, head back, I was taken aback by the sight which surrounded me, as the piercing scattering of stars was suddenly apparent; the profusion of stars across the Milky Way making sense of the legend of Hera's milk squirting into the sky, after Hercules had sucked too hard. As well as the sense of awe when we see the sky as it really is, we realise what it is to look more intensely, more keenly; particularly in the cold night air (cold on my face at least).

I do not pretend that I could have any *real* sense of what it might have been like for those shepherds, or indeed for any shepherds out on the hills of First Century Palestine. But there is something in the clarity of the stars against real blackness that makes us more alert. Something primal, as we both watch and listen.

And the job of those shepherds was to watch intently in the darkness – to watch with all their being, particularly for danger, for wolves, ranging about for prey; and to be ready even to fight them off. Something else few of us will have experienced, though many are this year of course fighting to keep the metaphorical wolf from the door; perhaps also in the cold, as most of us get poorer in real terms.

In the central part of our story, after the light has shone for the angel's announcement and then receded again - and after the multitude of the heavenly host, saying 'Glory to God' in the highest, has gone - the shepherds find Jesus, the babe, lying in a manger. We hear little of what that encounter looks like, though the shepherds make known abroad what the angel has told them concerning the child – that He is a Saviour, Christ the Lord.

Mary ponders these things in her heart, as the shepherds return, glorifying and praising God.

But they return to the darkness, to their precarious existence on the cold hillside in Palestine, watching again in the darkness for predators. Who knows whether they will ever see Jesus again; what outward difference their visit will have made to their lives?

I think most of us Christians are rather torn between only really hoping for our faith in Jesus to bring inner healing, and, on the other hand, retaining *some* expectation that it - He - will bring real-world, physical, change to the world we live in. Change of the kind that Isaiah speaks of: of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, an image those shepherds would have known, and wondered at. *'And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.'* That imagery is coming to life again this year as so many of our Ukrainian sisters and brothers are forced to live so far from their houses, friends, family and friends – many of whom are fighting, lest we forget how this Christmas must be for them, as for so many refugees. And this Christmas, rather than the blaze of light it usually is, Kyiv's Sophia Square has the light of just one tree.

But the thing about light, is that however little of it there is, and however much darkness surrounds it, and however heavy that darkness, as long as there is *some* light, that light illumines the darkness; and the darkness cannot put it out.

This year we continue to need the message which the angel told the shepherds on that dark hillside 2,000 years ago. It would be easy to say that we need it more than ever, to emphasise my message, but I could have said the same for the last couple of years (had I not been self-isolating for each of those Christmases at least); and it may well be that I could say the same next year. But need that light, we most certainly do.

The shepherds are told, *'And this shall be a sign unto you. Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'*

Well, even if this story mostly takes place in the darkness – and even if Jesus Himself is not illuminated as the angels are, the light in the heavens stands for the Glory of God; and Jesus is the light of the world.

We may be unused to *literal* darkness, but in the midst of every other kind of darkness, as we watch this Christmas, let Jesus not just be a sign of hope, but let Him be the bright shining light which is our hope, and sustains us. This is not just some grand, poetic metaphor.

For the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Amen