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Dark Night of the Season (Genesis 1. 1-5)

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In the Christian calendar of the northern hemisphere, the darkness of mid-winter is pierced (symbolically speaking, at least) by the coming of the light, the birth of the Christ-child. 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined' (Isa. 9.2), so the Christmas liturgies say, for the 'light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1.5). Here darkness is a metaphor for the absence of God, for evil and death. In their winter season, our northern brothers and sisters are invited to celebrate how this darkness is dispelled, how this night is ended by God's nearer presence. In the words of Luke's gospel the 'dawn from on high has broken upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1. 78-79).

The seasonal metaphor doesn't quite work like that for us – at least in terms of liturgy. The darkness of our mid-winter just goes on. The long, cold nights of June are followed by those of July and then August. There's no symbolic interception, no major festive interruption, and God does not, even metaphorically, break in to alleviate the gloom. How should we respond to this absence, this silence? Christmas in July offers one possible solution but – quite apart from its dubious theological credentials – one round of Christmas preparations per year seems enough to me. There's also the 'vacation' solution – avoiding the whole discomfiting dark season by going away – to Queensland or, in my case this year, to Rome!

But maybe there's another way of responding to the failure of God (liturgically speaking) to break into these dark nights of ours. Maybe our long, uninterrupted, festively unconsolated winter season offers us a chance to explore other dimensions of the powerful spiritual metaphor of darkness. Because in the Scriptures, images of darkness and night don't always signify evil, death, or the negation of God. Sometimes – it's quite the reverse. It's *through* the darkness, *in* the night that God is active. Which means that this darkness is not so much to be dispelled as accepted, not so much avoided as undergone.

I think of Jacob wrestling with an angel through the night, refusing to let go until he receives a blessing which comes, at daybreak, as the gift (and call) of a new identity. I think of Mary overshadowed by the power of the Most High as she consents to be drawn into the adventure of her life; of Jonah trapped for three days in the dark, in the belly of a 'large fish' until he who remembers who God is for him; and the descent upon Abraham of a 'deep and terrifying darkness' as the Lord makes a covenant with him. In the imagination of our Genesis story, creation, light itself, is born from darkness – that formless, chaotic potency hovered over by the spirit God. And these resonances, of the creative, transfiguring potential in darkness are present even in the gospel accounts of Jesus's death. As Luke says, when Jesus was dying 'darkness came over the whole land ... while the sun's light failed' (Luke 23. 44-45). Of course, this plays on the usual dualistic imagery – light versus dark, darkness signifying the triumph of evil and death. But it's also, paradoxically, *in* and through this darkness of death and tomb, that resurrection, a new creation, is being wrought.

In these stories it's almost as if darkness, the darkness of confusion, dissolution, unknowing, chaos and fear, is not separate from light but internally related to it – a necessary passage, the place where God is more deeply encountered and we become more deeply, truly ourselves. It's as if, to be fully the bearers of God's purposes, we

must have spent some time in the dark – unable to see clearly, at the mercy of forces seemingly hugely more powerful than we are, living by faith, learning to trust.

For St John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish mystic and poet who coined the phrase ‘the dark night of the soul’, that was certainly true. And the reason is not that God is masochistic and wants to make things hard. It’s simply that there’s so much in us and our communities, in our customary ways of being, seeing, knowing and acting that are not congruent with the fullness of God’s truth and love, not congruent with reality. I am not always who I like to think I am. My life is not always what I have assumed it is about. Our virtue is not as uncomplicated as we have believed. The process then, of being dis-illusioned, of being asked to see, know or be differently is always experienced as deeply unsettling and disorienting – even a darkening of our vision, when things used to seem clear.

What makes this process harder and more painful for many of us is that we resist it – at many levels. We’re invested in the way things were. We want to maintain life on *our* terms – under our control, defended and socially acceptable. This means that the journey of faith is, in the words of Rowan Williams, ‘an abandonment of the familiar and secure [which] is an immensely costly process’.¹ And for John of the Cross, the paradox is that it’s precisely as we are coming closer to God, closer to the light, that our experience of darkness, absence, and abandonment will grow, as all that is not God in us comes fully into view, and is felt in its full weight. The dark night is something we undergo as part of our healing, on the way of enlightenment, illumination; for John it is grace, but it’s not cheap grace.

It’s important not to misunderstand the tradition here. The ‘dark night’ is not about accepting any and every suffering as if it is from God’s hand. And critically, we are

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, second revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.176.

not aiming to have an experience *of* something we might think is the dark night, some self-inflicted, self-dramatising anguish of soul – as if, somehow, that would give us spiritual brownie points. That’s just another game of the religious ego.

It’s simpler than that. Like Jesus’ disciples, like Abraham, Jonah and Mary, we are invited to give ourselves as truthfully and whole-heartedly as we can to God. We’re invited to keep giving ourselves even though we don’t know fully where we’re being led or what it will mean or what we might be asked to do. For most of us, this journey of faith, which is the journey of our lives, will go through some dark places – times of dryness, confusion, chaos and suffering. Mostly these won’t seem mystically, spiritually significant dark places. Just the usual run of messy, unsatisfactory human struggle, failure, shame and powerlessness.

But what we are promised, what we come to know for ourselves, is that even in the dark – maybe especially in the dark – God will work in us for our healing, calling us more deeply to ourselves and our vocations. Our work is to consent to be there, to remain as open and available as we can in the midst of things, trusting ourselves to the love of God even as we undergo the loss of old securities and meanings. ‘Conversion and repentance – those words (says Rowan Williams) which Christians ... have come to use so glibly – involve going down into the chaotic waters of Christ’s death, so that the Spirit can move to make “new creation”’. It is, he says, ‘Being unmade to be remade’.²

Tonight, as we celebrate this dark night of our mid-winter season, we remember the significance of times of darkness in our spiritual lives. And rather than prematurely dispel them with early Christmas, rather than going off Queensland to avoid them, maybe we can practise trusting ourselves to them – and to the love and mercy of God. And as we do, may we find, in the words of poet Nicola Slee, that:

² Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.18.

the darkness of God shall be a blessing

and the shadow of God will be for us

a light more lovely than the dawn

a lamp more gleaming than the sun.³

³ Nicola Slee, 'The darkness of God: a blessing' in *Praying Like a Woman* (London: SPCK, 2004), p.57.