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### **The Darkness Shall Be Light (Mark 9. 2-8)**

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‘Let there be light’ (Genesis 1.3). These are the first words God speaks in the bible – and, in the creation story, the differentiation of light from darkness establishes the first condition for life to emerge. From that moment on in Scripture, light signifies the presence and effect of God. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the Messiah thus: ‘The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined’ (Isaiah 9.2), and the gospels pick up this thread. In Luke, Jesus’ birth is foreseen by Zechariah as the coming of the light: ‘the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1. 18-19). And in John, it’s written of Jesus: ‘in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 1. 4).

In a similar vein, a raft of biblical stories suggest that the presence of God irradiates, illuminates and dazzles those who encounter it. The skin of Moses’ face is said to shine as he descends from Mount Sinai (Exodus 34.29ff). Saul is blinded by ‘a light from heaven’ that ‘flashed around him’ on his way to Damascus (Acts 9. 3) and, in a more contemporary encounter, Thomas Merton famously described what he sees in the light of God – people around him ‘all ... shining like the sun’, their inmost being ‘blazing with the invisible light of heaven’.<sup>1</sup>

In all this, the metaphor and experience of ‘light’ signifies life, truth, goodness, clarity, hope and understanding – enlightenment. ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1.5) is how it’s expressed in the first letter of John. In this semantic field, then, ‘darkness’ stands for evil, chaos, deception, ignorance and death. Speaking of the refusal of God’s coming in Christ, John said ‘the light has come

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), pp.157-158.

into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' (John 3.19-20). Elsewhere disciples are warned against participating in the 'works of darkness', and this imagery persists strongly in our cultural imagination. Think of Amnesty International campaigning to light a candle in the dark; of integrity commissions designed to shed light on corrupt and shady dealings.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration clearly draws on these meanings. In Matthew's version of this episode, Jesus' face, like Moses', is said to have 'shone like the sun' (Matthew 17.2). In the version we just heard from Mark's gospel, his garments become 'dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them' (Mark 9.3). We're to understand this event as a most profound encounter between Jesus and God ... perhaps even a revelation of identification. 'I am the light of world', Jesus had said (John 8.12).

And yet, what struck me in reading the story this week, is that it also touches into a second, perhaps less well-known, strand in the biblical imagination. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples are first overwhelmed by light. But then 'a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice' (Mark 9.7). Just as Mary, at the Annunciation, is 'overshadowed' by the power of the Most High. Here 'shadow', perhaps even 'darkness', are not opposed to God but represent the place of 'God's intimate presence'.<sup>2</sup>

A profound expositor of this strand of the biblical tradition was the fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory drew on the life of Moses to develop an understanding of the journey to union with God in terms of a progressive entering into darkness. You'll recall that Moses' first encounter with God came in the form of the burning bush (Exodus 3.2-6). Here God did appear as fire and light, and Moses is told to take off his shoes for he's standing on holy ground. But then came a second appearing of God to Moses, this time on the clouded mountain top of Mount Sinai

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Kariatlis, "'Dazzling Darkness": The Mystical or Theophanic Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa', *Phronema*, Vol.27 (2), 2012, 99-123, p.100.

(Exodus 19.18), and a third and culminating theophany which entailed Moses drawing near 'to the thick darkness where God was' (Exodus 20.21).<sup>3</sup>

Here are Gregory's words: 'What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the divine was beheld in light but now He is seen in darkness'. Well, Gregory goes on, let's not think there's a contradiction here. Our first encounter with God is about light – about throwing light on what in us needs to be illumined and faced up to. It involves a movement from the darkness of ignorance and sin to the light of truth. But the more we go on, he says, the more we approach to contemplation of God, the more we realise that God is beyond everything that is observed, beyond what our intelligence can think. And this means that to deepen our contemplation of God, we must leave behind previous ways of seeing and knowing. Our sight, our intelligence appears to fail, become clouded – but at this stage of the journey the deepening gloom signals not evil or ignorance, but something more like humility and unknowing.

As we continue in this way, says Gregory, there begins to dawn a different kind of knowledge of God: 'leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees ... it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness'. This is the darkness that Gregory describes as 'dazzling' – a darkness not of death and emptiness, but one 'filled with overflowing luminosity'. And what strikes me in Gregory's account of spiritual growth is that ultimately the encounter with divine darkness and divine light operates in the same way. Whether we're blinded by light or baffled by darkness, loss of sight is the condition for seeing God – where 'seeing' means not looking at an

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<sup>3</sup> Kariatlis, "Dazzling Darkness", p.104.

object, but being transformed by the One on whom we gaze. Poet Michael McCarthy writes of our 'looking hearts' being changed, 'until we [can] see blind'.<sup>4</sup>

Well, these are memorable, beautiful images – full of the paradoxes that theologians and mystics revel in. But my guess is that most of us don't feel ourselves on the brink of penetrating these depths of mystical union – whether by means of overpowering light or dazzling darkness. We may well feel ourselves overshadowed by the circumstances of our lives, or as if we're losing sight of anything we might once have named God. But is this really a sign of progress and deepening transformation? Or is it just debilitating fog and loss of faith? Not so much an exciting cloud seeded with hidden potential, but a grey and unremitting horizon of overwork, loneliness, mental muddle and endless pandemic in which we struggle to heal the wounds of our past let alone find our way to a meaningful future. How do we tell the difference?

Well, let me offer this. The varied uses of metaphors of darkness, light, cloud and 'o'ershadowing' in Scripture suggest that our experience of these things must be discerned. 'Darkness' has different qualities and leads to different places. On the one hand, there are the 'works of darkness' – malice, deceit, envy, abuse, prejudice, fear, death. These, our tradition insists, are not of God. They are to be refused – their futility illumined and their power over us dispelled by the clear light of life and love. On the other hand, there's the 'thick darkness' where God is said to be, the place where we learn to yield to God in absolute trust, letting go our drive to shape life on our own terms, beginning to 'see blind' as we become slowly, sometimes painfully responsive to a knowledge that is beyond knowledge. 'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you, Which shall be the darkness of God', writes T.S. Eliot in 'East Coker'.

But what's so tricky, in seeking to discern the difference between these forms of 'darkness' and the response appropriate to them, is that there can be profound overlap. Deceit and injustice do not belong to God. And yet, experiences of injustice,

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<sup>4</sup> Michael McCarthy, 'Metanoia' in *Birds' Nests and Other Poems* (Cork: Bradshaw Books, 2003), p.1.

trauma, illness, malice are precisely what may precipitate us into the kind of 'dark night' where we lose sight of God and ourselves and where the deep work of transformation takes place. When we read of Moses entering the cloud, of the cloud overshadowing the disciples at the Transfiguration, it sounds glamorous. But, writing of John of the Cross's notion of the 'dark night of the soul', Rowan Williams insists that the 'alienation and dread' intrinsic to this part of our journey to God 'are produced by all kinds of experiences, by the frustrations and humiliations of daily life', including 'the sordid illnesses of old age, ... mental disturbances, ... the loss of reputation and popularity, ... [or] simply finding oneself a nuisance to colleagues or family'.<sup>5</sup>

Carmelite Ruth Burrows warns against supposing that the 'darkness of God' is a 'dramatic interior "mystical" thing'. She writes: 'What is the essence of your grief, when all is said and done? Isn't it two things; a sense that you lack God, call it absence, call it abandonment, and at the same time a devastating awareness of your own wretchedness? Oh, I know, not in the least like what John of the Cross writes about, that is what you are hastening to tell me, nothing grandiose like that, just drab petty meanness and utter ungodliness. Yes, but that is what he is talking about'.<sup>6</sup>

So I wonder what this suggests to you? What might it offer if we related to the dark, confused and godforsaken circumstances of our lives as the place of 'God's intimate presence'? However little it feels like that, however unlikely it seems? T.S. Eliot approaches it this way:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed

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<sup>5</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.187.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, p.187.

With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,  
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama  
And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away-  
Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations  
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence  
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen  
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;  
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing-  
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker' from *The Four Quartets*.