

Dear Friends,

I don't need to tell you that this year has been a difficult and unprecedented one. We will all be changed in some way through what we have experienced and will continue to experience. We need to acknowledge the hard times, we need to grieve for our losses, we need to reflect on what we might have learned through it all. But today, of all days, is a day for hope. It is a day to recognise that the Light of God still shines and always will do, in the darkness of our world. It is a day when I want to ask you the question: *"Where have you encountered light in the darkness of this year?"*

One of my favourite spiritual practises is, as the old song says, to *"count your blessings, to name them one by one."*

Every month or so I sit down and reflect upon the work of God in my life and in this world by listing all the things I am thankful for. They range from the trivial and frivolous, like Leicester City winning at Tottenham, or the smell and taste of the first freshly ground coffee of the day, to the more profound experiences where God has spoken to me and lifted me up from a time of great difficulty, through the words of a friend, something I have read in a book, or a helpful post on Facebook. No matter how dark or difficult our days, I believe that with the love and care of others, it is possible to count our blessings and in so doing, to see afresh God at work in our lives.

Light in the darkness can come to us in all sorts of situations, through all sorts of means. Back at the end of March, I posted the following brief reflection on my Facebook page at the end of the first week of our first national lockdown:

"Things I have learned this week: Life can change in an instant; Teachers are superheroes; Management is not as easy as you might think; Church can exist without walls; I love spring but hate pollen; Many people are kinder than you imagine; Zoom is relatively straightforward even for a technophobe; I wish I knew how to use a video camera; Concentration is not always possible no matter how much effort you use; Families can survive if they are kind to each other; Connection and connexion are really important; The Psalms have got it covered; You don't have to shop every day; There is good to be found if your eyes are trained to see it; Darkness can be a good teacher if you know it will not always be that way; "Sherlock" really is great; Stillness doesn't come easily even in a time of isolation; Training is more effective than trying; It's good to talk; I have some great colleagues; I am addicted to Chinese food; The seasons keep on turning; God is still good!"

As I look back over the last nine months, I can say that I have learned how to use a video camera and I am still addicted to Chinese food! But I am struck afresh by two particular aspects of that reflection: *"There is good to be found if your eyes are trained to see it"* and *"darkness can be a good teacher if you know it will not always be that way."*

We might reflect on the countless acts of self-sacrifice for the good of others by so many key workers, or the amazing acts of charity we have seen, perhaps most notably through the story of Captain Sir Tom Moore. When we stop to think about it the “good news” stories of the last nine months have been more prolific than ever.

The one thing that perhaps has stood out for me – because it has resonated deeply with who I am, what I enjoy, and how I have sought to fulfil my calling throughout this year, is some lyrics from a song by John Bon Jovi called *“When you can’t do what you do, do what you can.”* I shared them a few months ago in a pastoral letter but they are worth repeating:

“Although I’ll keep my social distance, what this world needs is a hug. Until we’ve found a vaccination, there’s no substitute for love. So love yourself and love your family, love your neighbour and your friend. Ain’t it time we loved a stranger, they’re just a friend you ain’t met yet.”

In the First Letter of John and Chapter 4, we read these words: *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”*

We have all received one great big divine hug expressing God’s love to us through the birth of Jesus. As Christina Rossetti expresses it in one of her Carols, *“Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine; love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign...Love shall be our token, love be yours and love be mine, love to God and all the world, love for plea and gift and sign.”*

So, train your eyes to look for expressions of self-giving love, and there, you will see God at work; there you will see goodness expressed.

But God is not just found in light and goodness. God can be experienced too in the dark times and hard places. Surely the nativity story tells us that much. After all, Jesus was born to a couple out of wedlock, a long way from home, with only a manger for a bed and then he knew what it was to flee for his life as a refugee and ultimately faced the darkness of death for you and me.

But darkness can be a very lonely and dangerous place to live if you do not have the hope that a glimmer of light brings, that things will get better, that hope exists. Your experience of Christmas Day this year might not be what you wanted or expected. You may be in a place of darkness because of illness, or loneliness, unemployment, debt or bereavement. But you are not without hope, even if you feel you are without hope. God is present and active even when we can’t see it, even though we may not feel it. God has been born into the darkness of this world so that you may come to see the Light of Life who scatters fear and brings hope and peace.

Our reading from the first chapter of John’s Gospel reminds us that, *“In Him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”* To all who receive the Light of Life, he gives the right to become children of God, children loved by God, children with hope and a future. If you are in a dark place this Christmas, please know that it is a moment in time. It will pass. And after it will come another moment. And another moment. And the moments

will gradually get easier to face and live through and in. You are not alone in the darkness because God is present with you and darkness is as light to God.

So turn again to the One who is Light and Life. He is the One who makes a way for us. He is the One who works miracles in our lives through every answered prayer. He is the One who keeps his promise to us – *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* He is the Light in our darkness. That is who He is. And it is my prayer and hope that He will become all of that for you this Christmas Day. With Him, there is always a hope-filled future.

With every blessing for a love-filled Christmas and a hope-filled New Year.

Rev Tim

PS. Please note that there will not be a pastoral letter next week. All being well, it will return the week beginning Jan 4th.