



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Christmas Message 2021

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The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5)

When the writer we know as John wrote his gospel (his account of the good news of Jesus Christ), he didn't begin with a story of a stable or of a baby in a manger or of shepherds and wise men. No, in the introduction to his gospel, John talked about the Word - that is, the energy and love of God through whom all things created have their being. And he talked about light; light that has come into the world through Jesus

The light shines in the darkness – he said
and the darkness has not overcome it.

As in previous years, my Christmas card this year features a newly commissioned piece of art from the elder of my two daughters. This year's picture does have – at its centre - the crib with Mary, Joseph and Jesus and light shining from that scene. Around the crib are examples of good things; the church, the NHS, the giving of gifts, and other expressions of love. However, as one comes away from the source of that light, so the darker aspects of life are depicted; war, terror, and this wretched coronavirus that has turned our lives upside down over these last two years. The idea of the piece is to show that the triumphant light of Jesus Christ has not been defeated, and that our love and joy and kindness – which are themselves expressions of that light – continue to take back territory from the encroaching darkness. The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not overcome it. The light is still winning.

There is a real and vital message of hope in all this. It says so much more than just saying 'This too shall pass'. Of course, our present suffering and affliction will pass, and when things are tough, then we can tell ourselves that things can only get better. But our Christian hope goes further than that. We believe that the light of Christ has overcome and will ultimately triumph over the darkness of the world. When Dr Martin Luther King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he said, 'I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality'. 'This is why,' he said 'right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.' That is so much more powerful than saying, 'This too shall pass'. It says that good is stronger than evil; that truth is mightier than falsehood; that light is more powerful than darkness. This is about hope.

I was recently talking with the Dean of Canterbury – Robert Willis – whose garden prayers from Canterbury became a hit during lockdown – not least because of his cat who appeared to join in with saying ‘Amen’ and who would wander in and out of Robert’s robes. Some years ago, Robert had written a hymn that was inspired by something that Terry Waite had said in an interview. Terry Waite was held as a hostage for 5 years in Beirut when he was special envoy to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Last month marked the 30th anniversary of his release. Terry Waite was locked in a room in which there was no natural light because there were metal shutters in front of the window. However, at one particular time of day, the sun would break through a very narrow crack in the shutters and a shaft of light would enter the cell. Terry Waite said that he held on to that light - as a source of real hope for him when he was living in darkness.

Robert’s hymn says:

For the light is stronger than the darkness
And the day will overcome the night.
Though the shadows linger all around us,
Let us turn our faces to the light.

the light is stronger than the darkness
And the day will overcome the night.

The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not overcome it.

When I say ‘overcome’ it, the word that is used means ‘to grasp’ – as in to take hold and control it so as to defeat it. But, like the word grasp, it also means to understand it. The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not understood it. John also tells us that Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. They just didn’t get him. They failed to understand him. The word John uses for ‘accept’ is related to the word he used for ‘to grasp’. They are very similar words. The word he used for ‘accept’ means to welcome, to receive with open arms, to embrace. This is all about how we see the world. If we really grasp that the light has come into the world through the birth of Jesus, then we will want to welcome that light into our lives. The victory of the light over the darkness is not just as a result of the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. The victory of light over darkness happens when that same Jesus enters our lives – here and now. Alexander Pope once famously asked, “What do I profit, if Jesus is born in thousands of cribs all over the world unless he is born in my heart and in my life?” We need to welcome Jesus personally, to receive him with open arms, to embrace his presence in our lives. That is how the light gets in.

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And finally, we need to go on receiving the light of Jesus into our lives. John says that ‘to all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’. But the way that John wrote this part was to say that this is not a one-off event. We do not receive Jesus once and then that’s it. What he actually wrote was that ‘to all who go on receiving Jesus, who go on believing in his name, he gave power to become children of God’.

We not only need to come to Jesus who is our light and our life – but we need to keep coming to Jesus – and, when we lose him in the busyness of our lives – we need to come back to Jesus and receive again his life and his light in our lives. It is true, a God is for life and not just for Christmas.

The world is in a bit of a mess. The delegates at COP 26 have fiddled and filibustered while the world gets hotter and hotter. War carries on unchecked in the Yemen and elsewhere. People face famine and disaster in Afghanistan. The pandemic still rages in parts of our world. It is easy to feel that we are being consumed and overtaken by darkness. That the darkness is winning.

The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not overcome it. Good is stronger than evil; truth is mightier than falsehood; light is more powerful than darkness. We can and must have hope.

The darkness does not understand the light. Much of the world just doesn't get it. But we grasp it. We therefore welcome Jesus personally, we receive him with open arms, we embrace his presence in our lives. That *is* how the light gets in.

And we go on receiving the light of Jesus into our lives. We keep coming to Jesus – and, when we lose him in the busyness of our lives – we will come back to Jesus and receive again his life and his light in our lives.

The light shines in the darkness – and the darkness has not – will not – and never will overcome it.

May the light and peace and joy and love of Christmas be with you all.