Truro Cathedral

22.1.17 – Sermon for Third Sunday of Epiphany given by Rev'd Jane Horton

Isaiah 9.1-4; Psalm 27.1-5; 1 Corinthians 1.10-18; Matthew 4.12-23

'The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.' [John 1.5]

"How are you?"

It's an innocent enough question, isn't it? So often and so easily asked. And so often and equally easily answered. "I'm fine," I say. Or, "I'm good, thanks." Or, "I'm ok. How are **you**?" (note that skilful turning of the question so that I don't really have to say too much about myself …)

I bumped into a member of the congregation in Costa Coffee one lunchtime a few weeks ago and we had that very same exchange. "How are you?", they said. I hesitated for just a fraction of a second and then I answered truthfully: "Well, to be honest, I'm feeling pretty tired and flat at the moment", I said.

We went on to have a brief chat. I didn't go into great detail about why I was feeling the way I was. But it felt good to have been able to be real with somebody and I knew from their response that they were glad I had been. A human connection. A 'touching place'. And somehow – because I was actually feeling very down at the time – I found it a very comforting encounter: that other person's sincere question and kind receiving of my admission of weakness and struggle was a real bit of brightness in the middle of a pretty dark period.

Light and darkness. Darkness and light.

Some of the great themes of Advent and Epiphany, picked up by our Old Testament and gospel readings this morning:

> *The LORD is my light and my salvation,* says the psalmist …
>
> *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,* writes Isaiah …

And Isaiah's prophecy is picked up again and paraphrased by Matthew in his gospel, connecting it with Jesus moving away from Nazareth to come and live in Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee:

I think that there are times in all our lives when things can feel pretty bleak, pretty dark, pretty hopeless. We know those times can be triggered by many different experiences: by loss of one kind or another – perhaps bereavement, relationship difficulties or breakdown, loneliness and isolation; challenges at work, redundancy or retirement; by ill health or accident – our own or that of a loved one; by mental illness – on the increase generally. Mental illness can quite often be an added complication for those struggling with addictive behaviours or suffering homelessness. But suffering

from depression is a remarkably common experience – not visible in the same way that a physical illness can be - and the stigma often attached to it and other forms of mental illness should be something we fight hard against.
Of course some of us are more 'pessimistic' by nature than others, 'glass-half-empty' people; some of us suffer from *SAD* syndrome – *seasonal affective disorder* - and find the dark winter months very energy-sapping.

And if you're anything like me, it's easy to feel thoroughly depressed by the constant stream of 'bad news' we read and see and hear in the media. Times of difficult change and transition in our own lives and communities, in society and in the world around us can contribute to a sense of fear and vulnerability and encroaching darkness. It's interesting that at the same time Donald Trump was being sworn in as US President on Friday, Pope Francis was warning against a rise in populism and the dangers of allowing political crises to usher in dictatorships.

Sometimes sheer exhaustion after a period of being very busy and overstretched can lead to our feeling very low. And sometimes we just have a bad day … or two or three. I had a good friend at theological college, now a priest in a different diocese, who periodically has a couple of days of being very down – he's never told me if there's a specific cause, but he calls those times his 'black dog'. I've experienced those times myself over the years, as well as a rather longer period of anxiety and depression, precipitated by circumstances, well over a decade ago now, when I was on anti-depressants for several months.

For me, I think this most recent period of feeling down was caused by a number of different factors. They included great weariness after a particularly busy autumn and Advent, some ongoing family issues that came to the fore again over Christmas (don't they always!), the short, dark days at this time of year and a great sense both of despondency about so much that is happening in the world and powerlessness to do anything to change it or to even know how to pray about it.

What do we **do** at these times of darkness in our lives? How do we survive them? And thinking of our Gospel reading and how Matthew goes on to describe Jesus' calling of the first disciples, how do we keep putting one foot in front of the other in our faith journeys at these dark times of pain and brokenness, let alone 'shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father' as our baptism commissions us to do?

For me, I think one of the keys to getting through these dark seasons is the ability to be able to be honest. I'm not suggesting that we should wear our hearts on our sleeves with everybody who innocently asks us, "How are you?" After all, most of the time people are simply using it as part of a ritual of meeting and greeting and – as in so many cultures - don't expect more than the, "Bien, merci. Et vous?" response.

But I do believe it's important to be honest with ourselves, with trusted others and most especially with God. So what have I been doing, what have I been clinging on to over these past weeks, as I've waited for the sense of darkness to recede and the first glimmers of light and hope to reappear?

Well, one of the things I've been doing is talking to God about it, telling him exactly how I feel, often writing it down like a kind of on-going letter in the pages of my prayer journal. A bit like the way the psalmists' plaintively pour out of their experiences and their pain in some of the psalms – telling it to God exactly the way they feel it – and somehow finding a bit of hope in the very act of expressing it:

> *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?*
> *Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.* *[Psalms 43 and 43]*

Interestingly, my sense of utter weakness and of not having anything within myself to offer to others during these dark times, means that I have to rely totally on God's grace and strength and enabling in perhaps a far deeper way than when life is bright and easy. That isn't always very comfortable, but I'm sure it has to be a good thing.

And certain things take on a deeper significance. In his sermon last week, Simon talked about the mysterious and profound way in which the Eucharist nourishes us. Just as when I'm physically ill, I'm much more aware of the strengthening effect of food. So too when I'm going through dark times mentally and emotionally, I notice the strengthening effect of spiritual food much more. Spiritual routines are important even if we're struggling to pray ourselves – the daily rhythm of saying Morning Prayer with others is one of those for me – the reciting of the psalms and canticles (based on wonderfully comforting and encouraging passages from both Old and New Testaments), the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer.

Writing particularly about exhaustion, but with words that could perhaps also apply to times of depression, John O'Donohue talks about the *light in the mind* becoming dim, of gravity falling inside you, dragging you down, so that *you cannot push yourself back to life.* He talks about the need to *take refuge in your senses* and *open up to … small miracles.* And above all, he talks about the need to *be excessively gentle with yourself.*

Be excessively gentle with yourself. I think that's one of the things that I've been learning to do during this most recent experience of travelling through a dark place. In his recent book, *Being Disciples* – which we'll be studying during Lent – Rowan Williams reflects on this extraordinarily deep sense of God's loving presence that we can have, even at times when we feel we don't understand all that's going on around us, let alone have any of the answers. I've found that very comforting. Somehow, even in the midst of the darkness, when it's not always easy and sometimes impossible to 'feel' God's presence, I've nevertheless had a very strong sense of the gentleness and kindness of God – that far from being judged and condemned by God for my weakness, I'm somehow being 'held'. I've been much more aware and appreciative of the gentleness, kindness and supportive prayers of others too.

> *Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom, lead thou me on;*
> *The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead thou me on.*
> *Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene;*
> *One step enough for me.*

At times of darkness that's all we can do, just keep walking one step at a time, leaning on those God sends alongside and in blind faith, trusting that God himself is there, that he loves us and that ultimately the light of Christ shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome. Amen.