

## **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

### **DARKNESS AND LIGHT**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2013**

Psalm 27.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

I want to start this morning by encouraging you to look at our picture, "The cross stands empty to the sky". I know, you look at it every week, you can hardly avoid doing so, but look at it again. When Jean painted it, she was very clear that she didn't want to paint a crucifix - a cross with a figure on it. She wanted to show something far different. She wanted to show the light of God's life and love shining from the cross. So look at the white light. The light of God. The light of resurrection. The light which puts aside, abolishes the darkness.

"The Lord," said the Psalmist, David probably, "is my light and my salvation. The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" This is a psalm which is full of confidence. You would think it was written by someone without a care in the world. But as you read on, you realise that this is not so. There are enemies all around. There are times when the singer needs to cry aloud to God for help. In fact, in human terms he may be in quite a difficult or desperate situation. But he has decided not to fear. He has decided to remember that God is with him. He has decided to live in the light of God.

One of the things that has brought me pleasure this week has been the realisation that when I go out, as I do most days, at a ridiculously early hour - I have a friend who once accused me of getting up before God - the sky is no longer wholly dark. Oh, it is still mainly dark, and there have been some wonderful displays of stars, but in the east now there is the first hint of dawn, and I know that the lighter mornings are coming again. Soon I won't need my torch, I won't need my reflective waistcoat which Beth gave me for Christmas, and I won't need my gloves. It is a wonderful thought. But if every morning was light, if I never needed to think about seeing and being seen, or keeping warm, then I wouldn't appreciate the faint light of this week. Very likely I would complain because it is so dark. It is only when you have had true darkness that you appreciate the light.

In the same way, you only appreciate your health properly after you have been ill. You know how it is to be laid low by flu, maybe, or one of the bugs that go around, or by the aftermath of an operation, or by weeks or months of depression. Even when the worst of the symptoms have gone you don't feel really like yourself. And then, one morning, it may be quite suddenly, you realise that the dragging weariness of unwell-mess has gone, that you feel refreshed and energised and ready for life. It is almost worth the days or weeks of illness to have that realisation and be healthy.

So it is because of the darkness around him, that our Psalmist can appreciate the light of God's presence and promised help and protection. Because he knows what it is to feel alone, weak, afraid, helpless, he also knows the full joy of being befriended, strengthened, protected and helped.

But nothing seems to have changed in his outward circumstances, to give him this reassurance. He still talks of his enemies, encamped around him. He still talks of crying aloud to God, of people telling lies

about him, of days of trouble. All this is still going on, but he has looked to God, he has chosen to live in God's presence. He has turned his face to the light, and everything is changed.

It is easy for us to think about and name the darkness. We have our own particular darkness of fear and worry: our families, our job, our friends or lack of them, our health, our future. Only you know what your particular darkness is, and you may well take good care that no one else knows the fear and desperation which haunts you. And there is the darkness which comes to us from the wider world. There are the horrors of war, of disease, of hunger, of violence, of on-going conflict. Sometimes when we think of these things we can feel overwhelmed. But our readings this morning are not about the darkness, they are about the light, about choosing the light and living in the light.

The last verse that we read from Philippians enjoined us to "Stand firm in the Lord." And the Psalmist ends with the injunction that we should "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord." For both Paul and David it is a matter of choice that we should look to God, that we should walk in his light. Every day we have that choice to make, to let the light of Christ shine in our lives and from our lives, or not. And part of that choice is waiting. It is living with the situations which seem like darkness and choosing to believe that God is still with us and will lead us through and bring good despite everything. The light of God is not always obvious.

This week I was at a conference of Presbytery Clerks. I learned a lot that I needed to know, but it was long hours in a stuffy room, absorbing less than absorbing information. At the end of it all we celebrated communion, and we sang "Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here." The second verse of that hymn says "Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around." And I looked around the conference room at the faces, some tired, some worried-looking, and I thought "the glory of the Lord?" But it was. It wasn't in the room, well-appointed, anonymous. It was in these faces, tired and worn though most of them were. The glory of the Lord was in the faces which had grown tired or worried in the service of his church. It was in the faces of people who loved God so much that they would take on extra work, tedious, difficult work, so that his love might be known in every parish in this land. (And I know I do that work too, but this presbytery is easy compared to most.) The light of God is not always obvious, but if we look we will find it. If we wait we will discover it.

So living in the light is a choice, to look, to wait, to believe. Well, you might say, that means I can choose not to. But that is what you can't do, not if you want to be a Christian. Paul says that those who turn away from God's light, who set their minds on earthly things, have made themselves enemies of the cross of Christ. If you are seeking to be a Christian, you cannot also deliberately do something that makes you an enemy of the cross and the work of Jesus which was accomplished on it. The cross, and the crucifixion is one of the things which Lent is leading us to, (the other is the resurrection). The cross is the ultimate in darkness, but from it comes the ultimate in light (think of our picture). If we turn from that then we are in the dark indeed. If we turn from believing that God's light is there with us, though the darkness is blinding and stifling our senses, then we have turned from the work done on the cross.

This could all sound a bit like Pollyanna, determined to find something to be glad about no matter what. But it is not that at all. Ask the Syrian Christians living in cold refugee camps, or housed in unfinished rooms in Lebanese monasteries, waiting to find a way, not to return home but to get to Sweden, to France, to places where they have family ties. Ask Pakistani Christians, wondering if their neighbours will suddenly turn and invoke the blasphemy law to denounce them or their families, to have an excuse to attack them. They wait for the Lord, they continue to worship and to praise God, although their darkness is very dark indeed. They praise God although they mourn for lost lives and loves, for lost hopes and certainties. And because they praise God, although their lives are dark and difficult, yet they live in the house of the Lord, seeing his beauty and with the freedom to inquire of him, to ask what is happening and what will he do and where is his love. It is because they have chosen to keep their faces turned to the light, that they have the ability to ask questions in the dark: because they believe there is a God of light and love, there is a God who can and will answer.

In our Lent we spend time watching with Jesus. We remember his time of tempting and testing in the wilderness. Testing and temptation are not real if they are not urgent and unpleasant. Jesus had to decide to trust in God, to call on him for help, not to take the short-cuts offered to him. And so do we.

So we live in the darkness, believing in, trusting, waiting for the light. We live with personal fears and moments of despair, and with the times of near despair that the events in the world can bring us to, and still we look for the light, in everything, through everything, despite everything. We stand firm. Standing firm in such circumstances is about not giving in to the personal, not giving in to self interest, not, as Jesus did not, taking the easy way of looking only for what matters to us. Standing firm is to live as a Christian in the bad times as well as the good, not making personal circumstances an excuse for self-indulgence, whether in the matter of how we spend our time, or how we keep our temper - or don't - or how we use our money, or how we live with our neighbours. Yes, sometimes your personal circumstances means that your way of life has to change - we all grow older, we are all ill at times, we may experience greater or less degrees of poverty and hardship. But the way we focus our lives should not change. We live turned to the light of Christ, the light which shines from the cross. And in that light we find our priorities changed and our strength and hope restored.