

“Revealed In Darkness”

(John 12.20-33)

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Glory

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (23)

Glory is one of those words we use commonly enough, and yet what it means is a bit vague.

In today’s context, we can keep it simple...

To see Christ Jesus in his *glory* is to see his true beauty, his true nature or essence, revealed.

The hour has come for the true nature of Christ to be revealed. What was once hidden or obscure, is now there in full view for all to see.

In what is about to unfold, we’ll see God’s glory.

The challenge comes when we realise the event he’s talking about, is his death.

It is the horror of what happens next... that constellation of darkness we call Christ’s *Passion* – his suffering in betrayal, abandonment, torture and crucifixion – it’s this darkness, that will reveal him in his true glory.

In the darkness... the ugliness... the pain... we’re going to see God’s beauty and light.

The Two Mountains

Today’s gospel – situated in *John* just prior to the Last Supper – opens the doorway into Gethsemane. We hear, as if in a rehearsal, the agony of Christ in the Garden.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’?

No, it is for this reason that I’ve come to this hour. ‘Father, glorify your name.’” (27)

(Paraphrased)... *Should I seek to escape the darkness that is rushing upon me? No, rather... GOD let your true nature be revealed in this.*

Five weeks back, in the last week of Epiphany, the Transfiguration, Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountain to pray... and there his true essence was revealed in shining light. So beautiful!

Now, as Lent comes to its end... that story will be mirrored... when Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a mountain, (to a garden on the Mount of Olives), to pray... and here In Gethsemane, his true beauty is to be revealed once more... but NOT in light this time... rather in darkness...

John calls it deep night...

- despite Jesus' pleading – “*Stay with me a while*” – the three disciples sleep
- a friend, a companion will betray him
- the disciples abandon him – they run away

We see his pain, his agony... human suffering at its most painful, for before this night is done

- he will be unjustly accused and condemned
- tortured
- handed over to the brutality of crucifixion.
- and on the cross he will die.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (23)

And so, our faith says to us, if we are to know the true beauty, the true nature of GOD, it will be found not only in the experience of LIGHT... but also in the experience of DARKNESS.

This is a much harder journey for us.

We instinctively shrink away from it.

In *their* fear, the disciples sleep, and then run, for it is too much for them... and that is our temptation too.

Indeed, they are ‘me’ in this story...

In the face of suffering, I want to run away.

When pain comes, especially to those I love, I hate it. I try to deny it... to pretend that it’s not happening.

I want to wish it away... pray it away.

Sometimes, I rail at God... “*Why does it have to be like this? Why? What sort of God are you?*”

(Indeed, that’s the point... *What sort of God is this?*)

This is the place we don’t want to go.

But if we want to see the glory of GOD... the true nature of GOD... then this is a path we must walk.

That's what our faith tells us...

If we want to understand, then we need to *stay* with Christ Jesus in this darkness... not sleep, not run away.

Exploring Darkness

This teaching, this call/invitation... to explore the experience of darkness... brings us to the doorway of an abyss-like mystery.

It is deep mystery – it can't be contained, explained, or mastered.

(To turn it into trite propositional doctrine is a travesty!)

And so, quite appropriately, I am at a loss to preach it – this place of shadows which scares me.

This mystery that demands I enter its darkness and speak of its glory... and yet is a faith I cannot understand.

It could take a dozen sermons and I wouldn't have begun...

But I must try... for we'll never understand this story of Christ Jesus, without entering these shadows.

And so... 5 simple short reflections... that are my attempt to cross the threshold into a world I don't pretend to understand.

1. Darkness is as much a part of life as light. It can't be wished away... for every life includes pain and suffering. It can't be denied... It can't be prayed away. Darkness is as much a part of life as light.
2. We fear the darkness, but in faith we can learn to stay present within it... indeed to turn *into* it, rather than run away. In our own experience of Gethsemane, we choose to stay awake with Jesus. Beyond our fear, there is a place of faithful presence.
3. For God is as present in darkness as in light. Darkness is not the absence of God... nor is it the failure of God. Indeed, if we stay open and present in our suffering, the *true* beauty of GOD is revealed. (That's what today's gospel promises us...)

4. In maturing faith, we come to see that Darkness is Light. As the Psalmist says of GOD, “Darkness isn’t dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they’re all the same to you.” (139.12) In faith, perhaps we see this... even if it’s only in occasional glimpses.
5. And the *great* mystery that lies at the heart of the Christian narrative is this – darkness ultimately issues in abundant fruitfulness. Death becomes Life. “*If a grain of wheat dies it bears much fruit.*” (24)

Conclusion

Have you come across the contemporary phenomenon that is Nick Cave?

Nick Cave was a Wangaratta wild-boy – once an Anglican chorister, now a huge international rock star living in the UK.

Stardom came to Nick Cave decades back... but, of course, that’s no protection from human suffering... and in 2015 his teenage son, Arthur, died in an awful accident.

In the torment of his pain, Nick turned *into* his grief and explored its dark places... somehow deciding to trust himself to the darkness... (probably because he didn’t know what else to do.)

And in the process, he uncovered a deep compassion for humanity within his heart... even rediscovering the dormant Christian faith, that he only vaguely knew as an attraction to Bible and Christ as a boy.

And so the rock star, started to write and sing and talk about grief... about pain and loss... in a totally undefended, open and honest way... and 9 years later he’s still doing it. From a place of significant personal healing, he’s still doing it.

Every week he personally reads ‘thousands’ of letters from broken despairing people, sent to his website called *the Red Hand Files*... and each week he writes one public reply. They are often SO beautiful, so profound, I literally weep as I read them.

And in the most natural way, he often speaks of Christ... of GOD.

I marvel at the depth of his understanding... for he has no institutional training, no theology...

he’s not even ‘churched’... says he’s not even a Christian. He’s learned this profound knowledge of GOD from exploring the darkness.

At the heart of his counsel to the broken-ones who write to him is this...

When pain comes, as it inevitably must and will, (for it's at the heart of all human experience), you'll feel like running away... But do the opposite. Turn into it... embrace and explore, even though you think your heart will burst.

Trust yourself to the darkness... for you're not alone there.

And in a mystery that he has no words for, and says he'll never try to explain, there is 'something' LIFE-GIVING waiting there... in the darkness... and it will be given to those who are willing to enter and embrace.

This is the Passion of Christ... which is where we as a Church are going next.