

Light is a powerful metaphor in the Scriptures. It is used to represent God - the nature of God, the work of God, the character of God. Darkness in the Scriptures is a metaphor for evil- all that is not of God. Light dispels darkness. Where there is light, by definition, there can be no darkness. Where there is light, there is life!

There are different kinds of darkness, aren't there? There is of course physical darkness.

Have you ever experienced absolute darkness? Some years ago, we went to the Yarangobilly caves. We had a guide who took a group of us deep into one of the caves. The way was lit by lights on the sides of the tunnel, and the guide had a bright torch. At one point, far below the surface, he stopped the group and invited us to experience true darkness. He turned off his torch and then all the lights. It was BLACK. There was not a glimmer, not a molecule of light. We were instantly, totally blind. Had we remained without light, we would have been completely helpless, with no hope of finding our way out! That's physical darkness.

Then there is spiritual darkness. What is that? It is the darkness that comes from being cut off from the eternal source of light and life – who is God.

All of us are in spiritual darkness until we come to Jesus in faith. We are cut off from God and have no hope of saving ourselves, until we come to Jesus, who through his death and resurrection has overcome sin, and so dispels the darkness. Jesus is the light of Isaiah's prophecy:

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.

In our Gospel reading, Matthew quotes this passage and then goes on to describe how Jesus shone his light into the lives of Simon Peter, Andrew, James & John when he called them to be his disciples.

Those of us who call ourselves Christians have also been called, just as these first disciples were called, and we too have become what the Scriptures call "Children of the Light".

But I wonder if we still experience darkness? We are all familiar with physical darkness - the sun sets every evening, and we have night. It's part of life. Day and night. (Clip?)

But what of spiritual darkness? For those of us who have turned to Christ, we have experienced both spiritual darkness, and the light of Christ.

But I find that spiritual darkness has another face - it's that darkness that we, as children of the light, can sometimes experience, even though we have responded to Christ, and he has shone his life into our lives.

This is the darkness that, like the work of the evil one, is always at the gates. We still live in a fallen world, and sometimes, the impact of that world can still be powerful enough to affect us. And so, even though we are Christians, even though we are children of the light, sometimes we experience what we know as a 'dark place'.

It might come about as a result of grief - when we lose someone that is dear to us. Grief is a powerful force, and for a time, can have the power to take us into a 'dark place'. No doubt many of us have experienced that place.

Darkness might come about through a change in our circumstances - perhaps the loss of our health, or the loss of a job. A young woman I was speaking to recently shared that her husband had been made redundant. She was only working casually, and the bills were mounting. They have had to move in order to find work. That family has been in a 'dark place', though praise God, they now both have work.

Darkness may come about through depression - a most debilitating illness which affects as many as 1 in 5 Australians. My son Toby has a friend who is at home with two very active children under the age of 2, barely a year apart. As a family, they lack for nothing, But the children don't sleep well and one cries a lot. Mum is at home with them on her own all day, and it is taking its toll. She is being treated for depression.

And then there is what the early church fathers called 'the dark night of the soul' - that experience we can sometimes have, when we feel that God is not listening, that He is a very long way off and doesn't care, and we can't seem to drag ourselves out of that deep spiritual pit.

So even though we might be faithful Christians, even though eternally, the light has shined in our darkness, sometimes it can seem like that light can be rather dim at times.

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How are we to deal with these times of apparent darkness, in the midst of the that light-filled place we know as the Kingdom of God?

The psalm this morning is very helpful. It is written by David and is all about the temple, a place which for him, was a sanctuary from his enemies. David was forever being hunted, hounded and harrassed by his enemies. He spent a great deal of time in his own dark place! Because of that, this psalm has much to say to us.

1. The first thing that helped David in his dark times was TRUST.

David says, *“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? If an army encamp against me, my heart shall not be afraid: and if war should rise against me, yet will I trust.”*

Here we find David giving himself a pep-talk; he’s reminding himself that God is both his light and his salvation. God is GOD - and he has nothing to fear. He reminds himself that the Lord is his stronghold - a military term - meaning a place of defence and protection, where he is safe from all harm.

It can help us, if we find ourselves in a dark place, to remind ourselves of who God IS - something that is not dependent on how we might be feeling - and because of who God is, not because of how we feel, we can be assured that we have nothing to fear. We are safe and protected.

Reminding ourselves of the faithfulness and power of God can be good medicine.

Then David says:

One thing I have asked from the Lord, which I will require: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to see the fair beauty of the Lord and to seek his will in the temple

2. The second thing that helped David in his times of darkness was THE TEMPLE - which for him was both the gathering place of the people of God, and the place where he encountered God. For us, our Temple is the Church - though for us as Christians God’s presence resides within us.

David asks God if he can have the privilege of dwelling with God all the days of his life. And then, within the temple, David asks if he could - *“encounter the beauty of the Lord and seek God’s will”*

For David, the temple is a place where he is both encounters God and is led by God.

That can be true for us also. There is something about the “two or three” gathered in the name of Jesus, that somehow heightens our awareness of his presence, even amplifies it. How many of you have ‘sensed God’s presence’ in a service, or a gathering of God’s people? Church is also a place, where we too, can find guidance in the will of God for our lives.

I remember a service in little church in the North Goulburn parish some years ago. I don’t remember what I said in the sermon, but I do remember someone coming up to me a couple of weeks later, and sharing that God had used something said in the sermon to give her strong direction at a time in her life when she was floundering. God is present among his church in a powerful way.

3. The third thing that helped David in his dark times was PRAISE

David declared, *“I will offer sacrifices in his sanctuary with exultation: I will sing, I will sing praises to the Lord. ”*

Note the turn of phrase here - David is making a declaration and a commitment. It is something he has determined to do, regardless of what might be going on around him, and regardless how he might be feeling. “I will honour you and sing your praises” says David.

We could learn something from that also. In our culture, we are very ‘me’ oriented. We like to do what we want, when we want. If we don’t feel like doing something, we often don’t do it - and we have that freedom. But there is something to be said for the discipline of praise and thanksgiving. That is why the Scriptures sometimes call it the “sacrifice of praise.” We don’t always feel like doing it.

If we are going through a difficult time spiritually, and we don’t feel like praying or praising, we can let prayers written by others help us do that. The Psalms are full of praises we can declare, though we might not feel the sentiment. Psalms 145-150 in particular, are psalms full of praises to God.

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We have a Prayer book which is full prayers that we can use, when we don't feel we have anything left inside to come up with our own.

The discipline or sacrifice of praise is also good medicine!

As Christians we have been brought into God's kingdom of Light through our faith in Jesus. But sometimes, while in this world, we still struggle to overcome the temporal darkness, just as we struggle to overcome sin and sickness.

We are not on our own. God is with us, and we are part of his body, the Church - and the three things that helped David through his times of darkness will help us also:

1. Trust and not be afraid
2. Stay plugged into the church
3. Offer the sacrifice of praise.

Those three things can be a lifeline for us, keeping us connected to God, through times when we don't feel we have much to offer. May we be encouraged. Amen

Let's pray.