

‘The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it’.¹

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen’.

Well, in the words of Adam to his partner; “It’s Christmas Eve!!!”

Isn’t it wonderful how our Christian faith employs such a wide raft of symbolism to deepen our engagement with God. Along with Holy Week and Easter, Midnight Mass and Christmas Day are probably two of the richest celebrations of the year for this. The use of light, mist, sweet smelling fragrance, bread, wine, music, text. In one service, we have symbolism that feeds every one of our senses, even our often hidden spiritual sense.

I love a good sci-fi or fictional movie. Something like Star Wars or Harry Potter. Sometimes I even like to watch a good horror movie. I think part of the attraction is the way they so often masterfully employ symbolism to deepen the audience’s engagement. We see good and evil battle it out for ultimate supremacy. It is so exciting! The symbolism of good and evil is intermingled with lighting, sound and special effects to engage our emotions and senses.

Isn’t interesting how such deep-rooted Christian symbolism of good and evil (and many others) is employed almost universally, yet with such little conscious awareness of it.

Do you know how Darth Vader likes his Turkey cooked? On the dark side! Even their cuisine, it seems, fails to escape the typecasting.

Across the board, the wicked are portrayed as inhabiting or coming from the ‘dark’.

The thing that also fascinates me about these novels and movies, is how they take Christian symbolism and ethics, and weave them into the narrative. Even in things that have a clear intention to undermine traditional Christianity, things such as the Dan Brown’s De Vinci Code, the directors and writers are rarely able to get beyond using fundamental Christian morality to pull at the heartstrings of the audience and provide a plausible underlying plot. It is, by and large, used without even thinking about it – the ethics being so compelling. The danger of all this unthinking overuse, however, is that we lose sight of its true power,

¹ John 1:5

purpose and meaning. It begins to be seen as a nice fairy tale without any real bearing on our daily lives.

But 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.²

We live in a culture where so much of our moral framework is based upon a Christian ethic. That is a very good thing. Even those who would deny it, through the misguided principle of demanding a more non-religious society, struggle to form a coherent alternative morality that will hold up against these Christian moral pillars of our civilization. But this Christian ethic has slipped slightly in recent years, and failing a compelling philosophical alternative, has largely been replaced with the ethics of the markets; the non-morality of economic consumerism with all its obvious global inequality and injustices. The thing is, this is fast becoming the world we inhabit and so we begin to feel familiar and accepting of its world-view. At least, that is until we end up on the wrong side of its divides.

But 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it'.³

These words that we have just heard are taken from the opening chapter of John's Gospel. We are asked to use this passage in church every year at Christmas. That is because within it, we find a different, more authentic, way of viewing the world.

In John's Gospel, we do not get a Birth Narrative of Jesus, like we do in Luke's pretty depiction of the baby in a manger and the shepherds, or Matthew's exciting visit of the Wise Men. Instead, John presents a more eternal narrative of the origins of Jesus, as the Word of God. This is the same Word that God spoke when he made all things come into being at the beginning of time. Jesus, this Word of God, is a part of God from the very beginning and is therefore beyond the physical reality of what we know. You might say he is the very essence of meta physicality. God speaks the Word to bring order out of chaos, light out of darkness. Jesus, the Word of God, is the instigator of all that is good, even life itself. He holds all things together. He is born in Human form to repair what is broken and bring it back to the orderly goodness of God the Father. St Paul, puts it this way:

² John 1:5

³ John 1:5

‘for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven...’⁴

So, ‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it’.⁵

The thing about darkness is, it does not overpower light. Indeed, there is no such thing as darkness – per se. What we experience as darkness is really a vacuum of light. To make a room darker you do not add more darkness, you reduce the light. Darkness is just the absence of light. The same might be said of the relationship between goodness and evil.

Evil cannot overpower goodness. One of the great thinkers of early Christianity, a Bishop called Athanasius, had a very good way of explaining this. He said that the opposite of goodness was not evil, but nothingness.⁶ What we experience as evil is actually the chaos that remains in the nothingness when the order of goodness is removed. And such chaos is disorientating. A little like being in the dark. When there is little light, things feel disorientating. Let me explain.

The other day, I found that I had a precious two hours free one late afternoon. I decided that I would take my son to play nine holes of golf – something that I had been promising him since the beginning of November. We teed off late and knew that we might struggle to beat the fading light. By the time we got to the last hole, it was almost completely dark. As we hit our golf balls into the distance, it looked as though they disappeared into a dark abyss never to be seen again. We managed to find them okay, but only by using our experience and judgement of how golf balls normally behaved in the light. The darkness made it look as though the balls behaved differently, but our experience told us that in fact the balls should do exactly what they always did. Then when we got close enough to make out the green in the distance, we faced another

⁴ Colossians 1:16-20

⁵ John 1:5

⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*

dilemma. In the dark, the green looked twice as far away than it actually was. Again, we had to use our experience to inform our next move, and not just our eyes, which were telling us a very different thing. Had we only done what our eyes were telling us to do, then we would have hit our balls twice as far and they would have finished up somewhere in the club shop.

The same might be said of good and evil. When we stand in a place of moral vacuum, it initially feels chaotic and disorientating, but after a while we get used to it. The darkness and disorder begins to feel normal. But bring in a little goodness and suddenly the chaos of evil is outed for the deceiver it really is. Jesus, both eternally, and in the time of his presence on earth, has been, is and will forever be the bringer of the goodness.

When we have been in the dark for a while and someone comes shining a light, that light can hurt our eyes until they adjust to it. But the light is no less good, and we know it is a beacon of hope in our otherwise dark world - we just have to acclimatise.

When Jesus comes into our world, we shouldn't expect it to be easy to accept him at first, because our senses have to acclimatise to the light and goodness he brings. It takes time to hone our spiritual sight so that Jesus' brightness does not hurt our impoverished senses. Jesus comes in goodness and is the light of the world. Like the billions before us dating all the way back to shepherds on a hillside and impressive wise men wandering from the East, our lives are much better with Jesus in them. That is why Jesus is born into our world.

May you receive the Christ child in your hearts and may your Christmas be merry and bright. Amen.