CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT – ST NINIAN’S CATHEDRAL - 2014

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light – the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. Two phrases from our readings.

We are of course in that period when we seem to live in semi-darkness most of this time – I yearn for the uplift which the brightness of the light gives

And figuratively we struggle with the dark. As we were driving in to the Carol Service on Tuesday, I was listening to Radio 4 – usually short interviews but this one lasted the nine or ten miles from home to Bridgend. A young man’s voice, articulate and fluent. A surgeon talking about the experience of volunteering for attachments in Gaza and in Syria. He talked about what he saw. About how he and his team could help. About the change from sniper injuries which could often be mended to bomb blast injuries which could not. About his last period in Syria when almost all his patients died because of the lack of follow-up nursing. And, as we reached Bridgend, that same articulate and fluent voice began to talk about his rage – how little he could really do and how passionately he felt about it - the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

You may have seen or heard our own Bishop Gregor of Glasgow and Galloway over the past few days talking about the experience of being there at the scene of the tragedy in Glasgow. ‘I’m a priest – is there anything I can do?’ he asked. ‘Just stand over there and pray,’ was the answer. There are five souls … And he did that. And the wonderful Emergency Services and the hospital staff deploy all their God-given talents, their skills and their years of experience. But in the end, there are six flickering candles – and families and a community face the reality that there is nothing which can be done - nothing which can be done other than to take time to mourn and to grieve, to support one another and slowly to face the future – the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Friends write in their Christmas letter about their daughter’s breast cancer – which they say is now beyond cure. And they end with those familiar words from King George’s Christmas Broadcast in 1939:

*I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,*

*Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown*

*And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God*

*That shall be better than light and safer than known way.*

The privilege of being family, of friendship and – to be honest what drew many of us to ministry – is in that moment of being with people when there is nothing more which can be done. We yearn for answers – for things to do – but there is nothing. It is a moment of all-surpassing emptiness and desolation – yet God is there.

The bombed out hospitals of Syria, the tragedy of Glasgow, the personal tragedy of our friends – it can be relationships which just can’t be mended no matter how hard we try – it may be the helplessness of continuing poverty.

Christmas is about what God does when there is nothing more which can be done. He doesn’t set it all right – he pitches his tent among us in the presence of a vulnerable child – he invites us to follow an example of innocent, suffering love.

That presence of God in the world is the improbable presence of light in what would otherwise be unremitting dark – it’s vulnerable but persistent; it offers no quick answers just a trustworthy consistency. May that light be planted in your heart and in mine this Christmas that we may bravely face the dark and trust.

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