

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Walking In Darkness

We have hugely assaulted the physical darkness of the world. We seldom encounter darkness now, unless the system goes down. You can no longer go anywhere in England to look at the stars, because the lights of cities pollute even the countryside. In our own lives the ability to turn night into day has robbed us of the small obedience of “calling it a day” when the sun sinks, and we toil on by what we once called “artificial light”; we no longer even call it that!

“Give Me Lights, Ho!”

Our gratitude for the gift of instant light shouldn't dazzle us into forgetting what we have lost. “Turning night into day” is not an unmixed blessing. The more light we have, the more work we feel obliged to do. The more work we accept, the more anxiety we accumulate. Remember radio drama? Now, it seems slightly old-fashioned; the brilliant immediacy of television has taken over our notion of what broadcast drama should be like. But the radio play did something marvellous, inviting us imaginatively to supply the scenery and the costumes, the figures and facial expressions of the characters. The experience of a drama on television is comparatively passive: they do it all for you. They show us bright, palpable images, that used to be of our own making; that could expand, but usually limits, our sharing in the creative experience. I wonder if the blatant, glistening world we've made does something similar to our whole experience of being alive. Without darkness, and shade, the world seems one-dimensional, and we gradually lose our power of imagination. We can also lose the power to dream, gawping at the cruelly-exposed reality that surrounds us, warts and nowt else.

Spiritual light

God didn't exclude darkness from his Creation. He divided it from the light, but allowed it to stay. If you want to know why, you might like to search out the silver poets of the seventeenth century, and read a marvellous poem: *The Night*, by Henry Vaughan. He was a man who did not insist on the blaze of day. He was a mystic, and knew that to pass through darkness is essential for us. The poem is a meditation on the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus *who came to Jesus by night* (John 3). It's a strange

meeting, and Jesus uses it to remind Nicodemus that he can have no certainties about the way of God, whose Spirit moves where and as he will. Vaughan accepts the mystery of darkness, and shares with the reader his certainty that it is where human knowledge fails, that God can reach and find us:

“God's silent, searching flight: When my Lord's head is fill'd with dew, and all His locks are wet with the clear drops of night; His still, soft call; His knocking time; The soul's dumb watch, when Spirits their fair kindred catch.”

Darkness Within

Darkness is at its most threatening when we have to walk in it, unsure of our bearings or even of our destination. I say that, and at once I know that most of the people around us are living their lives in this condition. They have little idea of their own creation by a loving God, so they don't know where they come from. They have only the most elastic principles of right and wrong, mostly based on personal taste alone, so they don't know how to walk. They have less and less notion that the whole human project is actually a pilgrimage, a journey with a purpose, which will one day unite us and explain to us the reason for all that we have endured. So in a sense that isn't true of Christians, they don't know where - if anywhere - they're bound. We can speak of resting in God, even in the midst of our earthly travelling; but only if we have been visited by that searching, loving Christ described by the blessed Henry. If we had no knowledge of him, the darkness would remain the terrifying reality which obliterates all sense of meaning.

A Great Light

Only those who know that stumbling, fearful walk in the darkness can really find joy in the promise of light. Those who mistake artificial light for the real thing may find for themselves a sun-bed existence of fluorescent clarity. But if we have any sense of the world as belonging to Christ who is its true Light, we can only be contented with the dawning of his day, which we see in today's Gospel breaking over Galilee, the morning of his first ministry, where he says to Peter and Andrew *Follow me*, and they leave their nets at once, and follow him.

Fr Philip