

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Seen In The Visions Of The Night

When God created the light, he did not banish darkness from the Creation. *He gave the great lights to shine*, but the night was still victorious, every nightfall. The world exists and is ordered to the creative power of the One who made it; but pinned back, slightly restrained, at a short distance are the forces of chaos, still resurgent and dangerous. We know instinctively that this is the truth. Every day we see evil triumphing in God's world, and every night we watch the dying of the gladdening heavenly light.

### Through A Glass, Darkly

Second-hand, by mirrors, confusedly is how (Paul says) human beings see God. In the Bible we often find earthly darkness as a time of revelation – as if ordinary sight has given place to some kind of spiritual seeing which is alerted to a different order of things. Thus in the Fourth Gospel it is *by night* that Nicodemus comes to find the Light of the World; it is a man born blind that sees and knows Jesus, whilst the sighted Pharisees remain blind to him. The most potent experience of God the Redeemer in the Old Testament is the Passover, where the Hebrews wait in their travelling-clothes for God terribly to visit the homes of the Egyptians in the still of the night; in the New Testament the Crucifixion is shrouded in unnatural darkness, in which *we saw his glory, that of the only Son of the Father*. It was a sure instinct that led the Church to set Jesus' birthday at the Winter Solstice, and to mark it with a Midnight Mass.

### One Like A Son Of Man

It is in the depths of night that Daniel sees a human being led into the presence of God, and watches him loaded with *sovereignty, glory, and kingship*. In the darkness we sense the mysteriousness of the experience: Daniel is seeing things he cannot comprehend, things whose import and meaning lie on the far side of a dawn yet to come. Jesus said to the Twelve: *What I say to you in the darkness, tell in the daylight: what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the rooftops!* and when their brightest experience of light – the Transfiguration – is over, he says: *Tell no-one the vision, until the Son of Man be raised from the dead*. So there is an interval of darkness, which will last until the moment of judgment, when *everything will be made plain*. Our lives remain in this divided world, with its areas of darkness and

light, the place where we have to choose between life and death.

### Jesus Before Pilate

In the Gospel today Jesus' life is brought to judgment; yet Pilate seems to be on trial as well. Certainly this process, enacted in an extraordinary dialogue rather than a crowded courtroom, moves into strange ground for a hard-pressed Roman prefect; few such high officers of the Roman Empire can have asked a prisoner *What is truth?* John wants us to know the huge import of the trial, to know that Pilate is a man daring to sit in judgment on the Son of God, who said *I am the Truth*. It is because Pilate is truly in the dark that he loses his footing; *no friend of Caesar*, the priests say, and indeed Pilate does not feel like a good representative for that clear-sighted, motivated power whose symbol was the eagle, which held the world in its talons. He is uncertain, taken out of his depth by this Jew who calmly answers questions with questions, and seems indifferent to the kind of power Pilate has always trusted. This is what the confrontation is like between the powers of the earth and the single authority of God. Most modern scholars believe that, when Pilate felt himself least sure of what he should do, he seated *Jesus* on the chair of Judgment and called out to the people "Here is your King!" There is no contest between Jesus and Pilate, because God is invulnerable, even before the Caesars, and in this divine confidence Jesus shares. So it is no earthly crown that Jesus claims, and Pilate speaks truly when he says *there is no harm in him*. This is not a power that Rome should be concerned to crush; and yet the Prefect senses the danger which his gentle presence has provoked, in a seething crowd amid the hatred of priests and scribes. Pilate in this scene has met Christ, who is in truth a king. Pilate's life - not founded in the truth - is still judged. The quiet invitation to us who acknowledge him is that we should lay aside for ourselves every attempt to bully and dominate the world, and to live in his royal peace.

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