

**Isaiah 9:1-4**

**Hope Lights Up**

One of the things that as people we fear, or at least are wary about or find restrictive, is darkness, because, to state the obvious, it takes away our ability to see what is around us. If you think about it, you might walk through a well-known room in your home throughout the day without even looking where you are going, just working on memory, but if you have to move through that same room when it's dark you will find yourself stumbling and groping around. We might walk down a street or through a park in the light, that we have no intention of going along or through when it's dark. Military attacks often happen at night. Search parties have to be called off when darkness falls. Light gives certainty, gives direction, shows things as they are; it gives hope. The absence of light, darkness, takes away all of these things for us.

So, it's not surprising that we have come up with lots of sayings which use darkness and light to describe the situations we are in or how we are feeling. How about the darkness ones first of all, what can you think of? When things aren't going too well for us as individuals or a group, we might say; 'the storm clouds are gathering', 'there are dark times ahead', 'these are dark days', 'I'm in a dark place', 'this is our darkest hour' (often attributed to Winston Churchill). When we say these kinds of things, and this seems to go across many cultures, even back to Bible times, we get a sense that things aren't good, hope is gone, the future is uncertain. How about the flip side, the positive sayings we have about light? 'Brighter days are ahead', 'there's light at the end of the tunnel', 'looking toward a brighter future'. As a metaphor, using darkness to describe doom, gloom, hopelessness, and light for joy, comfort, and moving forward positively, is one we can relate to very well.

This symbolism is not just used in movies and TV shows to show the good and the bad, the hopeful and hopeless, not just in lighting and costumes but also even in the music which is played, but it is also used, very strongly, in the Bible. Way back in Genesis 1, the very first command God gave in Creation was, 'Let there be light!'. That light was the beginning of the universe and all the life in it.

The plagues God sent against Egypt included the country being plunged into darkness, and the final plague, the death of every first-born son, occurred at night. When the Israelites then went out of Egypt and on to the promised land God went like a ball of fire before them; a light showing them to the land of new hope God was leading them to. In many other places in the Bible, like John chapter one, this theme of the light of God's love and the hope in brings shining through the darkness of the sin of the world comes out. We are currently in the season of Epiphany, which begins with the wise men following the star, God's light, to see the child who had been born as the light of the world. Light displaces darkness. Hope pushes away despair. God's love and forgiveness for us in Jesus carries us through the sin, guilt and lostness which can too easily bring us down.

Hope lights up. We know that this is an image we use a lot. Leaving aside faith for now, we'll come back to that in a bit, what are the things which bring light into your life? Perhaps it is the people who are in your life, those you love and who love you, those you care for, those you are proud of, those who give you great pleasure in who they are or what they achieve. Maybe it's your work, paid or voluntary, what you feel you contribute for the good of others and wider society, even the world, the satisfaction you get out of what you spend your time and energy accomplishing. Is it your hobbies, what you create, what you care for, what you enjoy doing either alone or with others; those activities which bring a smile to your face either when you're doing them or when you think back on them? And on that, is a part of the light in your life the people, events, accomplishments, that you can look back on and it gives you a lift just thinking about them? What kind of a difference does it make to you having these lights in your life?

And, on the flip side of this image, what brings the dark times, the storm clouds, for you? The first things that may come up in the minds of many of us are the things we can struggle with, those which bring us down and push the light away; sickness for ourselves or others, the death of someone we are close to, relationship struggles or break downs, not feeling fulfilled in our vocation, conflicts with other people, disappointment with ourselves or others, guilt or regret over something we have done and wish we could undo, a feeling of failure, a struggle with something we want to stop doing or feeling

but feel we can't defeat on our own. And then, to look wider, both around us, across our nation, and around the world, as well as seeing many causes for hope and joy, we can see too easily, and perhaps pick up and concentrate on too much, the injustice, selfishness, the hardship, which people go through and which can further increase those feelings for us sometimes that our lives, and even our world, are in darkness.

There are times when that darkness which can be a part of our lives is dealt with, pushed away, by the light that comes to our lives from ourselves and the world. That is a good thing, and something we will often be told to concentrate on and work towards. There are other things, like grief and regret, which we may learn to live with so that over time while their effects are still there they don't make everything seem as dark as they first did. But God knows, and we know through our faith, that over all we need something, someone, bigger than all of that to really drive our darkness away. This is what the prophet Isaiah talks about in our reading today; the light who has come into the world. Putting this prophecy together with all the others in the Bible, we know that this light is Jesus, Immanuel, God is with us, the light of God's love come into our world. Isaiah says here that the people who have walked in the darkness - that's us and all people - have seen a great light. It is a light which shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows. God's love for us in Jesus is the hope which lights up our world and our lives. In this reading Isaiah talks about how all the things which can bring darkness are reversed; the nation is made stronger, the workers bring in a good harvest, the soldiers are victorious, abused and broken people have been rescued and set free. Through Jesus, God's light comes into our world and our lives, to bring forgiveness, to bring strength, to bring peace, and to bring hope. The light of the world is the only One who can truly help us to move through our deepest darkness.

We all need hope to keep going. If there is no hope we give up, because there is no point. Darkness is the absence of light, of hope, in our lives. Looking at this prophecy from Isaiah, a promise we know God made true in Jesus, what difference does this hope and light make to you in your life? How do you encounter it, know it, live in it? We come to know this hope through God's Word, as we read of both the promises He made and how He kept them, as we read of what Jesus has done in coming

into our world as God's light and love among us. We know we are joined to God's love and hope in our baptism, we even give to the newly baptised person a candle as part of that ceremony as a reminder of this. In Holy Communion, in a very real and physical way we are joined to all Jesus' death and rising again means for us, the hope of forgiveness and new life it brings to us, as we receive His body and blood with the bread and wine. And we together, and as individuals, as God's people, living our lives in Him, both know and show the light of God's hope as we live our lives as people who live in the light. For pushing away the darkness in our lives and our world, this is the strongest light there is. Those other things will still happen, they will still often cast shadows over us, but the light of God's love for us in Jesus, and the hope this brings, will always be there to guide us, comfort us, and lead us through.

It's such a strong theme of our Christian faith, of this season of Epiphany, and of what we need in our lives and our world; God's love for us in Jesus brings hope which lights up the darkness we face as we go through our lives. We can enjoy all the other things which bring light into our lives, and thank God for them, but in Jesus is the hope which really lights up the darkness. That's not to say it's always going to be easy, and that there still won't be times when we struggle with this, but Jesus shows us God's love, shows us God's strength, brings us God's forgiveness, as He has come to be the light of hope for us. Amen.

#### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- What light/darkness sayings can you think of which we use to speak of hope or despair in our lives and our world? Can you think of examples of this imagery being used in movies?
- What brings light into your life? It might be particular people, places, activities, memories, etc. After you have thought about this, thank God for the joy, light, and hope these people and things bring to you.
- What brings darkness into your life? Personal struggles, relationship struggles, sickness or health concerns, concerns about others, the news we read and hear each day, etc. Once you have thought about this, bring these things also to God in prayer, asking for the hope of His love in Jesus to bring light into these situations for you.
- Consider what it means for you that Jesus came to be the light of the world, the hope which lights up, for all people. How do you experience or encounter this? How do you live it out? Are there any times or situations when this is a particular comfort or encouragement for you? Are there any times or situations in which you struggle with this? Bring to God in prayer anything here which you are thankful for or struggling with.

Pray: Thank God for sending Jesus to be the hope which lights up the darkness. Ask Him to help us to know and show what this light of hope means to us in our lives.

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