



**GRAY'S
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January 24th (Epiphany) 2021

Isaiah 60:1-6 & John 3:16-21

At the end of the annual Christmas Carol Service we always read that passage from the Gospel of John about the Word made Flesh – the coming of Light into the darkness of the world, and the darkness “comprehended it not”, it did not overcome it.

This season of the Epiphany is about how that light shines in the world. Not by all the peoples of the world coming to Jerusalem, as the Old Testament People of God thought would happen. But by the light spreading out from Jerusalem to fill the whole world. The story of the Early Church was about how the Gospel spread through the then known world, opening up the good news to Gentiles and breaking down the barriers of class, culture and gender which kept people apart. As St Paul wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

We have had our fair share of darkness over this past year. The Pandemic has brought death to so many people and destruction to so much of what we took for granted. We might step back from our own troubles to remember those parts of the world which do not have our developed and free-to-all Health Service. We might also remember the much greater impact on those who do not have the kind of secure income many of us enjoy. But even so, it’s been a dark time for us all.

The light that is now beginning to pierce the darkness is of course the coming of the Vaccine, its current roll-out to the most vulnerable, and the hope that by the end of the year life might be returning to normal. But is there some more light shining ? Let me suggest three things.

First, we have experienced through these dark days the emergence of something rather different from the more selfish, insular values which have dominated our society through recent years. People in the health service have worked long and sacrificial hours. Those in Care Homes and depending on community care, so long ignored, have taken centre stage. People whose livelihoods have vanished have

received public support. The poorest people on Universal Credit have been assisted, although we don't know for how long. After years of being told that there wasn't enough money to provide proper public services, and that economic crises must be paid for not by those who caused them but by those who suffered most from their consequences, we have discovered that 'we are all in it together'. So when we talk about 'returning to normal', what 'normal' do we mean? And for us Christians, how does the Bible help us answer that question? Indeed, what Bible are we reading? The one that some right-wing evangelicals held aloft as they stormed the Capitol in support of Donald Trump? Or the one that says, very simply, that we are to love our neighbour as ourself?

Second, if Covid has taught us anything it's about our connectedness on a global scale, in the spread of the virus and in the concerted response to find and deliver the vaccine. But there is an even more deadly enemy out there, threatening not just people but the planet itself. This year may be make-or-break over Climate Change. There is now some light from the new administration in Washington, but the need for everyone to act is vital and urgent. 'The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it'. But this earth and our part of the cosmos is what God has entrusted to us. If we can defeat the virus by acting together, there is hope that we can secure the future of our planet in the same way. It is a flickering light, which needs to be fanned into flame.

And third, finally, there may be some light in what we have learnt about ourselves during this past, dark year. Suffering and death can push us one of two ways. To reject any notion of God, and see life as something to be borne as best we can before we enter the final darkness. Or to look through, under or beyond our present experience to something deeper and greater. Jesus Christ did not come with easy answers, or to pretend that hardship and fear can simply be wiped away. But he came to show us how God shares in that suffering, in that death, and offers us a way through to the other side. Over this past year church congregations have grown, albeit mostly on line. People have talked more openly about faith. Maybe we will look back on this time and see a rekindling of interest in the deeper things of life, even a renewed commitment to Christ, the light of the world, who shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.