

Canon Michael Webb

On Christmas Day as we wished Abi in the choir Happy Birthday, I felt that pang of sadness for all those born at this time of year. I am sure they must miss out on the presents and celebrations that the rest of us take for granted as we concentrate on celebrating Christmas. Our Saint John suffers the same fate with his birthday in heaven falling on December 27th and often being forgotten altogether. So its good that his birthday, our church's patronal festival falls on a Sunday so that we can remember our saint and give thanks for all that this church building and community dedicated in his name means to us.

His birthday hasn't always been forgotten. Only two weeks ago sitting in the vicar's seat I noticed that the prayer desk has a plaque on it dated St John's day 27/12/1901 it says "Given for the service of God in memory of John Newenham Hoare by his wife and children. 'This then is the message which we hear of him. That God is light and in him is no darkness at all'". It is a fine and practical birthday gift – a place for the priest to lead prayers- and a reminder of one of our Patron saint's key themes.

And actually that fits into our Christmas celebration too. As the Queen reminded us in her message this year, in our carols and readings at Christmas we rejoice as we hear again John's words that the God who is light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it. Words which come of course from the opening chapter of John's great Gospel.

But who was John? He is traditionally associated with John, one of the sons of Zebedee who left their nets and followed Jesus. Became part of the inner group who were at the heart of the events of Jesus' ministry and eyewitnesses of all that happened as our Gospel reminded us. He wrote or was at least the source of the stories which are told in a very different way that Matthew, Mark, Luke in a more reflective thematic style. He gives us so much that enriches our faith – his emphasis on Jesus as the Word as Helen said at Midnight Mass, on the signs which point to his divinity and on the great 'I am' sayings culminating in 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'. The 3 letters to the early church which bear his name were possibly written from Ephesus where the story goes, he preached his Gospel that Love was everything till his death aged 100.

I want this morning to pick up just one theme – that on our prayer desk the coming of light into the world which we find in the light of Gabriel's appearance, in the vision of the shepherds in the shining of the star and which is replicated on every Christmas tree. The word light has been used 4 times in St John's day collect, in our NT reading from his first Epistle we read the source of the prayer desk quotation 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all'. We are reminded that the birth of Jesus reveals to us that God is not full of wrath or anger or vengeance for our failures but of light joy and peace. We heard the promise that if we walk in fellowship with him, we too shall be full of light. If we walk in his light we shall be cleansed from the darkness within and given strength and hope to walk in his way in 2016. It also means that we shall walk in fellowship and harmony with all those who are children of God's light (may be very different faith and colour) and that there will be no room for ambition or bickering in his church just mutual service and support.

And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The days seem very dark at the moment and we need to hear that message of hope. We have had one of the darkest autumns ever and now the days are at their shortest too. After yesterday's further rain and flooding we wonder how much darker it can get. The events of our world provided more darkness – the Paris massacre, the chaotic scenes of refugees, the horrors of IS. More personally as well as those flooded out, we hear of personal sufferings and financial difficulties facing so many that it can all threaten to drag us down. Yet John insists we look to the Word made flesh the coming of the Light in the tiny defenceless babe born into a cruel world and to take courage.

Perhaps we need the darkness (though not sent by God to teach us a lesson) to appreciate the light. Major Tim Peake in the International Space Station said we are used to the pictures of Planet earth and how beautiful it is from orbit but look the other way and see just how dark space is. "It's just the blackest black that's a real surprise to me." A little torch seems to have a feeble light in your bright home but in a power cut it will keep you going or flash it from Latrigg or even Skiddaw and someone in Mountain Rescue or even in the town will see it and raise the alert. We need the blackness to show us the true power of light.

In the darkness of the floods, the struggles of the refugees, the times of illness or need, there are shown up amazing points of light. We have been humbled by the outpouring of kindness and support for flood needs –I have been sent cheques for £50 and £200 for the flood appeal from friends-, the groups of Muslim men coming to work and support our nearly totally white "Christian" towns, the setting up of Churches Together's Street Friends scheme. The darkness of poverty has led to the mushrooming of Food Banks which, despite the bad mouthing by the Daily Mail, continues to help 100's of thousands of hungry folk a week through your donations. The darkness of the plight of refugees calls out the kindness of strangers in many places.

We may fear the darkness but we are called to be children of the God who is Light in whom there is no darkness at all. We need to recognise his light gifted to us and to nurture and cherish the light even on the darkest day. We need to let his light in us inspire us to help others find their way in the darkness, to share our light with them.

But John's message which we need every bit as much as his first hearers 2000 years ago is that God's light housed in the fragile container of a new born baby is never overcome. The Life death and resurrection of Jesus shows us that the light of God shines on despite the darkness. We need to stand firm in that hope in all the darkness that 2016 is sure to throw our way, to go on believing in the light, walking in the light and nurturing the light for others too.

St John didn't write the hymn we sang every Sunday in Advent but I think he would approve of the chorus: *Christ be our Light! Shine in our hearts, shine through the darkness. Christ be our light! Shine in your church gathered today.*

Happy Birthday St John!