I wonder if you are the sort of person who prefers the dark to the light? Do you like winter evenings, perhaps with a real fire if you’re lucky enough to have one, and a nice warm drink, with the cold world safely kept at a distance beyond heavy curtains? Or do you prefer long drawn out summer days, where you can breathe deeply, and embrace the world with all its beauty, and all its people?

They’re quite different, aren’t they? As we head into the winter, I often think how much I regret leaving the summer behind, and how long it’s going to be before it will be time to move freely around the world again. But there is something really magical about this time of year. Although those summer days are wonderful, especially for people who are good at living in the present moment, they don’t give you so much to look forward to. You know that photographs in the summer aren’t so interesting, because there isn’t enough contrast.

Winter days, dark days, are times to dig deep inside ourselves to discover the light within. They are also times to look forward - New Year’s Resolutions are made in the depth of winter, as we look ahead to the promises of the year to come - promises made by us, and promises made to us.

Winter is a time of wonder, when what’s good stands out clearly. If I put a candle in this cathedral in the full light of day - or even with all our lights on - you would find it hard to see. But in the darkness, a single candle would be easy to find, because you would be able to see it from one end to the other of this amazing space.

I’ve come to realise that living in hope means recognising the darkness around us, and being almost grateful for it, because we have something to look for, to look forward to - the coming of the light. We have a service here in the Cathedral on Friday - the service for the longest night. It’s a precious time for those who find the razzmatazz of Christmas all a bit much - but it comes at the turning point of the year, and that’s really significant. It’s the longest night, so, by definition, it’s the night when things begin to change, when there is everything to hope for, everything to look forward to.

The whole of tonight’s service circles around just such a night. A night when all hope was, perhaps, lost - but in which hope was about to be reborn. A night of hunger, of cold, of poverty, of enemy occupation and tax forms. A night when you can imagine Mary turning to Joseph and saying, “I just can’t do this any more”. Many of us have known times like that in life, and if we haven’t yet, we probably will. I’m sorry, that may sound a bit down for such a lovely occasion - but of course that’s exactly the reason for the occasion!

The bible readings this evening describe the world’s need, and God’s remedy. The music and poetry are there to bring that home - this world can be a dark place, women, men and children turn against one another and end up isolated, hurting and afraid. Can you imagine what it’s like for God to see that, as the loving creator of a wonderful world, where people have freedom to make good choices but throw those opportunities away. And we’ve all done it!

The good news is that in the darkness of our own making, God’s light still shines. It’s not always easy to see, but sometimes when the night is darkest, the smallest star can shine most brightly. But we have to watch! Last night at the Christmas Concert, I was on the front row with the organiser of the NSPCC group sponsoring the event. We were enthusiastically singing the carols, with their brilliant music settings by Paul Leddington Wright, when we realised that we had fallen out of time with the music - we’d gone off on our own, and it sounded awful. Paul looked across rom the podium at us, pointed to his conductor’s baton, and said “follow the stick”.


The readings and music for tonight are there for a reason. Not just to provide a beautiful experience, but to set a rhythm, a beat to follow. They describe the moment when heaven touched earth, when ‘this small hot naked star fell to Mary’s arms’ ... ‘breath, mouth, ears, eyes he is curtailed who overflowed all skies, all years’.

He did this for you, for me - and we are invited to respond. To learn from him, to follow his beat, his rhythm from darkness to light, from winter to summer. But it’s in the deepest dark that we will most often find him. And when we find him, or allow him to find us, we are found and re-born in acceptance and love beyond our wildest imaginings. a new purpose and possibility in life, which allows us to leave the darkness behind and walk into the light of God’s pathways.

If you would like to make some changes to your life for this coming year, or if you want to know more about this life changing encounter which God offers, you might like to consider joining a community of others on the same journey. Here in the Cathedral, or in other local churches, we are trying to work out what it means to follow Jesus in our mixed up and muddled lives, in the midst of a mixed up and muddled world.

That sort of thing is often best done in community, where we can support each other – whether in a large community like the Cathedral, or a small fledgling community like St. Clare’s, which meets in our precincts, or another local church. This year, think about whether joining such a community could be right for you – part of making those choices which will lead to the life you want for yourself, your community, our world.

Let us pray:

Loving God, help us to start afresh this Christmas, to open our hearts and minds to your love, to be ready to let go of those hurts that define and imprison us, and to walk freely with you, following Jesus in the paths of peace. Amen.