

Hello and welcome to this, the first of a series of six relatively short videos which form part of our Lenten course here at St Paulinus Church in Crayford. The course itself is titled 'Passion in Perspective' and aims to reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the passion story, predominately using the gospel of John as the main influence in those thoughts. If you are new to the church or do not know me then I am Roger Laing and am a Licenced Lay Minister in the diocese of Rochester and have been worshipping at St Paulinus Church in Crayford for over twenty years.

For many people, the past year has been exceedingly difficult for a lot of people. Difficult in terms of work, isolation from our normal routines and the grief that we have endured when faced with perhaps a death from a loved one or friends we might know.

And for many, this difficulty is expressed and experienced through a sense of darkness and gloom that at times can completely overshadow our very importance in this world, and for some that are prone to depression and mental ill health refer to this darkness as 'black dog' and can be so debilitating that in cases it has pushed people to end their own lives.

So, darkness in life generally, and particularly over the last year is something to take really seriously. And it is to this subject of darkness that I want to reflect for the next few minutes.

The oldest biblical reference to the crucifixion in terms of darkness is recorded in Marks gospel written around the year 70 CE. Where at v33 we read **"Now, when the sixth hour had come there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is translated 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?'"**

The extent of the darkness that befell the land is not fully known, but it is believed to have extended beyond that of just the immediate area of the crucifixion as the Greek word word 'ge' meaning land can also mean the entire earth, but I think its fair to say that the darkness would have covered an extensive area in ancient Palestine. And this was certainly the view of early church fathers like Tertullian and Origen.

I think when we read such a passage and place ourselves in the context of the time, it must have been a very strange and frightening sight. I don't know how many of you have experienced those strange eclipses when the sun is hidden by the moon during normal daylight hours, but it really can be quite terrifying, not quite knowing whether the full light of the sun will return, even though we are told it will by our eminent scientists and astrologists.

And I guess it would have been exactly the same for those that were present at our Lords crucifixion, but also for those going about their normal everyday business, unaware of what might have been going on in Jerusalem. Yet we are told that this darkness on this occasion lasted from midday until three pm. A whole three hours of uncertainty of what exactly was going on in the stars!

But what was this darkness, where did it come from, was the darkness from God or was it representative of someone more sinister?

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the deity of Jesus and how He was there right at the beginning of creation with God the Father, and if you want to catch up on that, you will find it on my blog site or You Tube channel, and so I think we have to think here, also in the terms of that sovereignty, if we are to understand the darkness that was present in that passion. For God is sovereign of all and that includes Satan, the devil or however you want to refer to him? So, on that premise, it can be concluded that this darkness is not of Satan but was caused by God Himself. Now this might seem at odds to what or how we might perceive God to be, for we are used to seeing Him in terms of Light. 'Jesus is the Light of the world' as we so often hear. However, because God is sovereign, He is sovereign over everything, both light and darkness.

There are of course examples of God at work in both light and dark, as you would expect if I were claiming that to be true, and for the most part these biblical examples of darkness would be when God is exercising judgement. In the book of Amos we read, **'Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it'** (Amos 5:20), or maybe look to the prophet Zephaniah who says, **'That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, A day of devastation and desolation, A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness'** (Zephaniah 2:15). Infact, our old testament reading also from the prophet Joel which was read on Ash

Wednesday said, **'for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near- a day of darkness and gloom! A day of clouds and thick darkness.'** (Joel 2: 2)

And I use quotes like these not to cause unnecessary fear, although to fear God is good, but as a warning for those that are yet to place their faith in the Lord Jesus, for there is no getting around it good people, there will be a time of judgement with distress on scale that we just cannot imagine. However, running parallel with these scenes of anger, judgement and devastation is a message of real hope. For the passion of Christ is a message of hope through love, and it is hope through an unimaginable love that God has for His people to return to Him, that we can all hold onto.

For if we think about what is happening during this crucifixion it is that Jesus is being sacrificed. It is God Himself that hangs from the cross. Jesus is taking the full weight of the Father's wrath and being sacrificed for the world's sin, both then in the day of Jesus, for the past sins of those that have gone before and for the future sins of the world of which we here can all be included.

This picture of sacrifice is quite extraordinary when we think about it. It is a love that is inconceivable in human terms for a Father to lay down His Son for others. but imagine and believe we must.

On a personal level, when I became a Christian I had a conversion that caused me to experience both dark and light, which I suppose not surprisingly has influenced my own theology of how I see and interpret the scriptures, in particular the concept of good, evil, heaven and hell, but my understanding may be different to others who are no less valid and true, for God moves people to convey different messages to different people in different ways and we are all subject to cognitive bias through our experiences of life. But it is to my conversion that I now turn in order to give you some idea of what I encountered.

In 1995, I was living alone in Woodford Bridge after the break-up of a relationship and having to come to terms with the fact of leaving my young daughter without a fulltime dad (*or so I thought at the time*) And so I began a period of living a life of being single and all that entails, and looking back retrospectively I probably did so as a sort of coping mechanism to the situation that I unfortunately found myself to be in.

However, as the months went by this way of living provided no satisfaction or real comfort. I became conscious that something was missing in my life, but I didn't know quite what? Around that same time, I was introduced to the bible through a Jehovah's Witness of all people. Now prior to this period I had never before considered the bible to be anything other than a famous book written an awfully long time ago, but in order to confirm my atheistic view I began to read it.

After only a matter of a few weeks, as the questions of what life was all about grew stronger and my anxiety for the future grew, as I laid in bed one night asking myself that same question, I did what I had never done before. I prayed.

Now what I said was not something elaborate or complicated it was simply asking God, if there was one at all, to show himself to me, to let me know he was real. Now nothing happened immediately from that request, which didn't surprise me really, after-all I was an atheist, I didn't believe in God!

But a little while later I experienced something quite extraordinary. I felt an overwhelming sense of calmness. I saw what I can only describe as a kind of light show in-front of me, not any human depiction but simply shapes of light moving and swirling around in front of me. And this light experience was complimented by a feeling of goodness and love that I had never felt before. I felt straightaway that contrary to what I initially thought would have happened – nothing. I had in-fact been answered by God and he had revealed himself to me.

Life was all good, God had answered my prayer and that was great, I felt comfort that I had never felt before, but unexpectantly, as the manifestation of light, warmth and comfort faded, it was replaced by an increasing sense of doom and darkness in complete opposite to what I had just previously experienced and witnessed. It was a darkness that I felt was trying to consume me. It was like I had been made witness to a supernatural world of good and of evil. I cannot emphasise enough here, how real this felt, and it caused a fear that I had never felt before, it then became a mental battle that I had with the darkness in order to fight it, but I was conscious I couldn't fight it alone in my own strength and I called once again in prayer for God to come to my aid in order to dispel the darkness that was before me.

True to his word, that all that call on his name he will answer, the darkness faded and that fear of what it contained went and the light returned, and I became calm and comforted once more.

I hasten to add I was awake through-out this experience, it was not a dream.

Following this dramatic event, I drifted off to sleep and woke in the morning knowing that I had experienced both darkness and light and chosen good over evil. I was now a believer in the God of the bible.

What followed is another chapter, but I went onto be baptised, confirmed and here we are some twenty-six years later talking with you today.

But that experience all those years ago changed my life and changed me to who I am today, to that there is no doubt. Yes, I am still a sinner, and get things wrong, just as we all are, and I need to repent for the wrongs I continually do. But the difference now, is that I know that God forgives me because my faith is in Him.

There is I know darkness in the world, and we are witness to evil that seems beyond our comprehension. We may sometimes question how God allows such suffering and evil, but remember, God is sovereign, He has this in hand, and He is the God of both light and dark.

As we move through our time of Lent towards Easter, we might experience hard times of darkness both physically and spiritually, but I encourage you to hold onto the true Light of God through His Son Jesus Christ for He will set free all that call on His name. Maybe, take time in Lent reading something from the bible, perhaps read through the various accounts of the last days of Jesus' life in the gospels or follow the subsequent videos that will follow this one?

Jesus said in John's gospel, **'Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you, he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light that you may become sons of light.'** (*John 12:35-36*)

Whatever journey of reflection and repentance you make through the coming weeks I pray that we can all be rescued from the chaos of our sin and be made whole once again.

Amen