

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being through him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

These are the first few verses of the Gospel written by St John. They are normally read at Christmas, and no, I haven’t lost the plot. Our worship for Holy Week is centred around John’s gospel. We have just heard two of the final chapters. The very first verses introduce us to an over-arching theme for these days: the struggle between light and darkness, between good and evil. We need to hear those words again today, to remind us of the promise God made to us in the incarnation of his Son. The drama and intensity of our worship comes from that conflict between the unfailing light of God’s love in Jesus, who is the light of the world, and the darkness of those who would destroy him.

‘Destroy him!’ is the voice of the crowd and their leaders. Destroy and eliminate what we don’t understand, what doesn’t fit with our plans, what we cannot control, anything that threatens our position. Stamp out the possibilities of beauty, truth, compassion, love – so that we can work unseen, intimidating, manipulating, corrupting, destroying. Yes, this was first-century Jerusalem under Roman occupation, but humanity has not changed. It is inquisitions and gulags, detention camps, ethnic cleansing, forced ‘re-education’, gas attacks, trafficking of refugees – pick your own examples from the world today.

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus rode in bright daylight through cheering crowds. At Passover, he and the disciples celebrated in the light of the upper room. There was fellowship, teaching and truth at the table. But Judas, seduced by the glint of silver, left his companions and disappeared into the dark. After the meal, Jesus and the disciples went out to Gethsemane. Jesus went further into the darkness to pray, but there was no light for him, no relief, the cup would not be taken away. Then the wavering lights as the soldiers came with torches to arrest him, and a sudden flash of light from a sword, leading to one last act of healing. Jesus was dragged in the dark to the High Priest’s house, where a flicker of light from the fire picked out Peter, still near Jesus – but it was only a flicker. Peter denied the connection and disappeared into the shadows.

When daylight came there was a moment of hope that Herod and Pilate might release Jesus, but it was not to be. Judas realised that the gleam of silver was a false light, but it was too late. So, for three hours, as deliberate evil and conscious refusal to intervene or take responsibility combined, the sky itself went dark. The Temple trembled, the earth shook – and there was a sudden lightning-flash of recognition as the centurion realised that this man, Jesus, now hanging dead on a cross, was indeed the Son of God.

The body was taken to the tomb at dusk. The soldiers sealed the tomb, keeping the body in and the light out. The disciples shut themselves away. Jesus himself went down into hell, the deepest, darkest, most abandoned place of all. The political and religious leaders congratulated themselves on avoiding what could have been a nasty riot. They had not had to call in the army to control the crowds. The status quo had been maintained, no-one would

lose his job or his head as a result of the day's events, and the collusion could continue. There was, no doubt, much relief all round.

'I am the light of the world', Jesus had said to his followers, but for them the light had been violently put out. They had believed in this extraordinary man who told them that he was the Son of God. They had seen what he could do when faced with sickness, mania, despair. They had listened while he silenced those most disputatious of rabbis, the Pharisees. They had helped him feed a multitude, and even watched him bring a dead man back to life. They had given up families and friends to follow him. They had believed in him, in the way of life he had taught them and in the promise of salvation given through him by his Father. Now Jesus had been betrayed by one of them, and everything they had hoped for had been betrayed with him. This was the darkest of days.

We cannot enter into Jesus' torment – his willing acceptance of injustice, physical agony and mental anguish in obedience to his Father's commands. We follow Christ, but we cannot truly share this with him. But we can, perhaps, come closer to the disciples. We have all had times of desperate grief, bitter disappointment and shattered hopes; times when the light has gone out in our world and everything is dark and full of pain. But God is at work in that darkness. This is, after all, Good Friday. Truly to follow Christ may demand heart-breaking sacrifice and excruciating determination but, because of what Jesus suffered on the cross for us, we know that when we fail we are forgiven,. As the psalmist sang: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'