

Today's reading from Paul has two strong themes Light and Love.

And so let us start with light. Our epistle reading this morning has that fairly well known piece of scripture; "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light" And even if you might not know that particular piece of scripture with regards to the actual text, the use of darkness as bad and light as good, is most certainly a common thread within scripture. Because indeed it is so deep-seated within the human condition.

For the April Parish Magazine this year, as we were approaching Easter, I talked about an American Episcopal Priest called Barbra Brown Taylor, I hope you don't mind but I think I would like to revisit Barbra Brown Taylor again. So if you didn't read the April letter or don't remember then don't panic, and if you did and can remember glimpses of it I would like to develop on it a little further this morning.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an American Episcopal Priest who has written and spoken very wisely and sensitively about the contrast of light and dark. (Generally when writing or preaching I know it is custom to refer to the personal by their last name, however after reading Barbra Brown Taylor so much I have warmed to her and so I am going to call her Barbra.) When I was still at Theological College I went to a talk where Barbra was publicising her book *Learning to walk in the Dark*. She is an incredible American academic with the most soothing voice to listen to, and listening to any talk by her involves metaphorically crawling along the floor to pick up the little gems she leaves behind as she talks. I therefore apologise if I over quote, but it is impossible to paraphrase Barbara well, without losing her wisdom. Her first observation at her talk I went to a couple of years ago, was that our culture to the point of obsession, through fear tries to shut out the dark.

Fear of the dark *is* normal, and never anything to be ashamed of! However, it is how we run away from it, and in fact how the church encourages us to run away from it, which should be questioned. Within our theology as a church we have nurtured the human condition to fear the dark, and enhanced it to communicate something about the power of God. We know people are innately fearful of what lurks in the dark, and scripture often uses that as a device to point us to God. I think I would argue that this shows a very clumsy way to talk about God, and indeed it shows an institution that in the past has had no problem with using any resource to hand to communicate theology, even if that resource was encouraging fear. As Barbra puts it:

"Main stream Christianity has never had one nice thing to say about darkness. From earliest of times Christians have used darkness as a synonym for sin, ignorance... and death."

And this hasn't gone away. Within our liturgy at church there are often hints of using and exacerbating the fear of the dark to express a bigger theology. For example the collect from Compline and Evensong "lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night" or even the stark warning that opens Compline as darkness descends and we prepare for sleep "be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:" And of course the baptism liturgy, where the Godparents face the looming darkness of the setting sun to renounce the Devil because the devil surely must live in the Dark and then to turn to Christ in the direction of the rising Sun. Dark bad, Light good.

But is the dark all that bad? Looking beyond the language used in today's epistle from Paul we see a wonderful theology of love and joy. St Paul says that Love is the fulfilment of the Law, it is beautiful refined theology which still give us bucket loads to celebrate as a church today. However, pitting the dark against the light, I feel is something we should start to become a little more cautious about. After telling us that Love is the fulfilling of the Law, Paul goes on to give a stark warning that we must "lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light" Paul encourages us to strive to do what is right, to love our neighbour, for that is the fulfilling of the law, and when all things are said and done, that is what counts. However by talking of light and dark Paul opens an Pandora's box of theology. Separating light from dark encouraging the dualistic curse of how we express ourselves. But why dark and light?

Barbra reminds us that "...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

We have become so preoccupied with the language used in scripture, in a way which means darkness against light, has a theology of its own, that run completely counter to what Paul is trying to say in our epistle this morning.

Barbra rather robustly offers us this "Darkness – has been libelled for long enough. If there is any truth to the teaching, that reality is divided into halves, then surely it is the truth, that those pairs exist to illumine one another, not annihilate one another. What can light mean without dark... Is anyone altogether good or evil."

If we stick rigidly to the simplistic expression of darkness vs light, good vs bad, then it suggests that God is absent in the dark. Again as our baptism and Easter liturgy suggests as we obsess over light, that God is light and without light there is not God we craft a theology where we can isolate ourselves,

when we feel in any moment of dark. So much so that we run from the dark in a way which we needn't.

Barbra says something very prophetic which I think could give people a reminder about living with both darkness and light in our lives "I wish I could turn to the church for help [with the dark], but so many congregations are preoccupied with keeping the lights on right now that the last thing they want to talk about is how to befriend the dark."

Paul's epistles are beautiful, to skip back a bit in Paul's letter to the Romans he says "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." That is the love of God which Paul speaks of but I think it is important that we limit how far we go with any language tools used, and as far as I can see light and dark, as a spiritual image has become flawed, because life is not that simple. Light does not need to be pitted against dark, but they embrace one another. We do not hold a faith with God present in the light and absent in the dark, present in the rising sun as he rules the day, letting the devil take over at night upon the setting of the sun, but rather a God of a living faith for all seasons in our lives, which sees the glory of God in constant phases. In times of just a glimmer, dull brightness or in times of full sight, sometimes when we least expect it or when we most need it. Love is the fulfilling of the Law, and love transcends light and dark because nothing can separate us from the love of God.