

it hard to give or to receive love. They find it impossible to be creative in their work. They forget how to enjoy themselves. Despair takes hold of them. Maybe we have been in that place at some time or other in our lives.

There is no way forward because we can see only darkness. There is no help because we can see no hands reaching out to us. We can do nothing but stand still and the shadows take us over.

That was where Isaiah's people were. They had trusted in a power which had betrayed them. They were surrounded by enemies on every side. They could not see how they would survive as a nation. They had lost all their energy, all their creative power, all their love of community, all their hope and all their faith. The shadows were taking them over.

When Jesus sat talking with his disciples he could see that his people would face a similar fate: the temple would be destroyed, both Christians and Jews would be persecuted by an Emperor whose power had got totally out of control; there would be suffering and betrayal and they too could easily end up engulfed in shadow.

But *the people walking in darkness have seen a great light* said Isaiah and, if you remember what I once told you about the Hebrew language having no clear tenses, this verse can mean *the people have seen a great light* or *the people are seeing a great light* or *the people will see a great light*. It is a promise for all time and for all people. Yes, there will always be shadows. But there will also always be light.

And what is this light? It is not the light of our own positive thinking because when the shadows engulf you completely you have lost all capacity to think positively. It is the light of a greater power than ourselves: the light of divine love and eternal wisdom; the light of holy power and unquenchable hope. It is the light of which St John was to write centuries later: *the darkness cannot put out this light*. It is the light of the presence of God himself in our world and this light was never seen more clearly or experienced more deeply than in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Countless men and women have known the shadows but they have also been given the light and not often because they themselves have been looking for it. The light has found them.

And this light, they have said, has shown them the way forward through the shadow places.

This light, they have said, has revealed for them where their friends and comrades are.

This light, they have said, has given them back some hope.

This light, they have said, has brought them to understand themselves and life and God a little better.

This light has shown them their lives and their world as places of possibility rather than dead ends. It has saved them from going down into the pit of black despair.

You know that light which was there yesterday for Isaiah? It's there for us today.

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And because this is the light of God, it is not just about putting a brave smile on your face through bleak times. It is a transforming power which will make a long-term difference to ourselves and to our world.

Back in the time of Isaiah, the Assyrian empire soon got its comeuppance in the form of the even more powerful Persian Emperor. Under this new regime, Isaiah's people

were allowed to return to their homeland, re-build their homes and re-establish their religion. And because his people had received the light of God in their dark times; because they had been given hope and wisdom; they had been able to hold their faith, maintain their community and now, when the time was right, they were able to restore their nation. Without that light the shadows of fear and despair would have overcome them and they would not have survived. There would have been nothing to re-build.

In the days of the great persecution, towards the end of the first century AD, the time of which Jesus was speaking, there was terror and cruelty in abundance and the Christian church could so easily have been stamped out before it had even got going. But it did not. As Jesus had promised, *those that hold out to the end shall be saved*. The light of faith and hope, love and courage kept the shadows of anger and despair at bay and the behaviour of the Christians during the persecution was such that more and more people joined them. The church grew rather than dwindled. Nero could not destroy it. The light was stronger than the shadows.

The shadows are still with us, perhaps a little more menacing now than they have been for a while: there are wars and rumours of wars; we never know when the next terrorist attack will strike; many of you, your friends, neighbours and families are facing financial and professional crises on a large scale; the ecological situation remains grave and in the Christian church there are times when we have good cause to fear that we shall not survive another generation.

The shadows are there- but so is the light. And that light of wisdom and truth, love and power, courage and peace, faith and hope is given to us in the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives day after day. And that light will hold us, guide us, inspire us and empower us through the shadows because it is far stronger than we are. It will keep us strong and keep us ready to rebuild our church, our nation and our world into something nearer the kingdom of God.

Despite the shadows, we can move forward in life and in faith.
 Despite the shadows, we can grow in understanding and strength
 Despite the shadows, we can receive deep wisdom and inspiration
 Despite the shadows, we can know the glory of God

We cannot laugh in relief that the shadows are gone- not yet.
 But we can laugh in defiance because the light of God shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.
 Amen.