

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 2nd December 2018
Luke 21: 25 - 36

I heard on the news this week that the sun has set in Finland, and that it won't rise again until the spring. By the time Santa Claus begins to make his way from Lapland to your house on the 25th of December, Lapland will be enjoying a mere two and a half hours of - so-called - sunlight. Rudolf's nose will need to shine brightly.

For some people, some of the time, this world is a dark world.

Portents will appear in the sun, moon, and stars. On earth nations will stand helpless, not knowing which way to turn from the roar and surge of the sea; people will faint with terror at the thought of all that is coming upon the world; for the celestial powers will be shaken.¹

How do people survive the darkness? How do people live through a winter like that in Lapland? What kind of a mental and physical toll must it take? I looked on the Finish tourist website called Visit Finland. If you are visiting Finland in the darkest months it suggests skiing, Christmas markets, reindeer rides, the Northern Lights, a tour on an icebreaker, and something called squirrel whispering, which seems to involve touring forests with a local Finn talking to squirrels – that's how desperate the Finn's get in winter.

It all sounds quite fun - for tourists, but while the darkness might be an intriguing place to visit for a while, living in the darkness, and spending months there, year after year is surely a very different proposition. In the bleak mid-winter, do Finns ever worry that that the sun won't rise again in the spring? I know from talking to people who live on the Western Isles of Scotland that winter months in exposed northern climates are harsh, and that in the midst of them, the thought of the summer helps little; the winter feels never ending.

But, the winter does end, and spring does come into people's lives if they can see the winter through. What must it feel like when the signs of spring start to emerge from the depths of the dark? How exhilarating must that be for those who have longed for it or who have forgotten about it?

And then they will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory. When all this begins to happen, stand upright and hold your head high, because your liberation is near. He told them this parable: 'Look at the fig tree, or any other tree. As soon as it buds, you can see for yourselves that summer is near.'²

¹ Mark 21: 25 - 28

² Mark 21: 27 - 28

For some people, some of the time, this is a dark world. It is going to be a dark Christmas for those people, for example, who have lost everything in fire-ravaged California. How do you pick yourselves up from that? Christmas always feels dark in Bethlehem where, despite being the birth place of the Prince of Peace, people still live under the violence and the darkness of occupation.

For people everywhere, sometimes there are seasons – times - when this world is a very dark world, when the sun has sunk in their lives, and from one day to the next the best they can hope for is a glimpse of twilight. A merry Christmas is not always an easy thing to experience; God knows that.

The first Sunday of Advent is, every year, a Sunday to reflect on the darkness of the world – not just how dark the world can be, but how much darker it might still get. We start our Advent journey towards the season of Christmas here, in this dark place because the four weeks of Advent are a journey from the darkness in to the light. Advent is a story about a flickering candle that is never entirely extinguished by the darkness, and which grows ever stronger.

The Advent season, when we look forward to the birth of Jesus and the promise that in time Jesus Christ will come to this world again, is a story about how we survive the darkness; it is the story about a journey of hope: a journey of hope taken by a young couple waiting for their first child; a journey of hope taken by poor, isolated shepherds looking for someone to care about them; a journey of hope taken by wealthy kings looking for meaning in their lives; a journey of hope taken by you and me from the place of darkness in this world or our lives in to the light.

I reflected on hope this week when I read an article in a newspaper about the fall in the globe suicide rate. In almost every region of the world suicides are in decline. The rate has fallen by 38% since 1994 saving four million lives, which is four times as many people as were killed in combat over that same period.³

Russia, where there has been a 50% decline in the suicide rate since 2006, is a good example of this trend. One of the reasons for the decline in Russia is because of the settling down of society since the upheaval of the post-Soviet era. Today, in Russia GDP is twice what it was in 2000; wages are better; unemployment is lower. As a consequence, people in Russia are drinking less vodka than they did in the immediate post-Soviet years.

In times of social upheaval people tend to drink more, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that suicide and drinking are linked; to some extent alcohol leads to suicide. In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev imposed tough

³ <https://www.economist.com/international/2018/11/24/suicide-is-declining-almost-everywhere>

regulations on the production and distribution of alcohol; vodka sales fell, and the male suicide rate also dropped by over 40%.

When the Soviet Union collapsed those restrictions were abolished and both alcohol consumption and suicide rates soared. What should we do when the days are at their darkest?

Keep a watch on yourselves; do not let your minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares so that the great Day closes upon you like a trap...⁴

Of course, this dark, cold season of the year is, and should be, a time of parties, and celebration, and trees, and carols, and joy, and family, and gifts, and food with plenty to drink; we need something to warm our hearts; to lift our spirits; fend off the winter blues from time to time - there is good reason to celebrate in the bleak mid-winter.

But, that experience of the Christmas, which is all around us - that is Princes Street on any Saturday afternoon between now and December the 25th, for example, is not a journey through the darkness to the light, it is just a visit to the darkness; a tourist excursion.

The Christmas that is all around us is not a candle in the darkness growing steadily brighter; it is not the longing for the blossoming of spring; or the deep, meaningful joy of a birth. It is more a flash of light for a moment, a firework, something which might, briefly, rejuvenate or illuminate, but might also blind those living in the darkness of life. To put it another way, the Christmas that is all around us is a one-night stand on a dark night compared to the Advent we mark in this place, which is more of a long-term relationship with the bleak mid-winter.

When Jesus was preparing his disciples for his execution, and the darkness that would follow, which is what we read about in our Gospel reading this morning, he taught that a long-term relationship with the night can't be sustained by material things, worldly cares: rich food, fine wine, and an imaginative gift; it is a spiritual relationship. The material things provided by the heavens and the earth will pass away, but the spiritual relationship with his words, his Gospel, his story, will never pass away, will sustain us forever.

That spiritual relationship is not so much something you buy, as it is an attitude, a faith, that you develop. You can't buy hope or consume the flickering flame of a candle.

If you want to survive the darkness long term, he said, don't start drinking long-term; don't let your life become consumed by worldly cares, material goods won't save you; keep a watch on yourself; be on the alert, praying at

⁴ Mark 21: 34 - 35

all times to pass through these imminent struggles and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man.

Advent is a spiritual season to remind us what Christmas is about. We use it to wait, watch and prepare spiritually for the birth of the story of liberation; in Advent, our liberation is near. But, it is not here yet. We know that we are still on that journey towards faith and the light. It is still a dark world, there are still dark lives, so Advent is a time when we wait, watch and prepare for Christ's coming again when the world will be fully liberated, redeemed, saved.

We begin this waiting, watching and preparing by spiritually recommitting ourselves to one another and to God through Jesus Christ in communion. Then over the coming weeks, let's enjoy ourselves, but also hold our heads high, keep watch, stay alert for when the day comes we don't want it to come suddenly like a trap. Let's not miss the significance of the light of love burning in the darkness.