

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 24th December 2019

"Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again," wrote Paul Simon, the opening words of his enduring song called The Sound of Silence. Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again.

Darkness was Paul Simon's friend. When he woke up in the middle of the night with a fragment of a tune and a lyric going around and around in his head, the best place he found to go and work them in to a song was his bathroom without the lights off.

Darkness was more than a friend to Michael Collins. Michael Collins was one of the three astronauts who flew on the Apollo 11 mission to the moon fifty years ago, which famously carried Neil Armstrong to the first moon walk. While Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were walking on the moon, Michael Collins was orbiting it high above in the Command Module. As he went around the far side, and looked out of the window of the Command Module on the opposite side to the moon, he saw nothing but the infinite black void of space. He said that the sublime beauty filled him with exultation.

I remember the first time I truly saw the darkness. It was at night on the road between Nazareth and Bethlehem as it climbs up through a gorge on the edge of Judean desert west of Jericho, the Wadi Qelt. I stopped my car, switched off the headlights, and looked up in to the night sky. Standing there I thought that there must be few more beautiful sights than the deep darkness of the night sky above an empty desert.

As Paul Simon found, the darkness is a place where distraction is eliminated, and imagination concentrated. As Michael Collins found, it is a place of deep, alluring beauty. As we all know it is necessary to our wellbeing; few adults like trying to fall asleep with the lights on, for example. But, as stimulating, alluring or necessary as it can be, nevertheless it is also a place of danger, fear and emptiness. The author Vladimir Nabokov once said, "Common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."

Paul Simon might have found writing in the dark helpful, but if his music was ever to be given life, he had to switch the lights on, leave the bathroom and expose his song to the glare of popularity. Had Michael Collins ventured outside his spacecraft with its life support systems in to the darkness of space, which had filled him with exultation, he would have found it not only to be alluring, but also cold and lifeless: no place for a human being; no place for life.

Just this week a report reminded us that if we had to choose between exposing ourselves to too little sunlight or too much, better choose too much; we can sleep without the light, but we can't live without it.

At the very beginning of the biblical story, in the book of Genesis, long before the events we celebrate tonight and tomorrow happened, the first thing that God did

when wanted to create life was to separate from the darkness, light; it is light that gives us life not the darkness.

Dark and cold and lifeless is the universe's natural state. Dark and cold and lifeless is the universe without light.

Here on earth in the northern hemisphere, particularly here in the north of the northern hemisphere, at this time of year, we know a little bit about darkness, and we know a bit about the cold.

In the middle of December, around the longest day, the days are short, and the winter is long. Dark and cold is our world. Dark and cold it may be, but our world is not lifeless, for the light, what there is of it, gives us life.

This evening and then for the next twelve days, the twelve days of Christmas, we celebrate the birth of a child, we celebrate life, human life, born in to a dark world that is not just dark under the canopy of a dark sky, or cold under a blanket of snow, but a baby born in to a world that is too often metaphorically dark and cold; a world where there is too much hardship, suffering and pain, and too much indifference, greed, and hate.

Celebrating the birth of a baby, the birth of new life, is not something new. Human beings do it all the time. But, at this time of year we celebrate the birth here in a church and not up at the maternity ward of the Royal Infirmary because we are not just celebrating the birth of a particular baby to particular parents, we are celebrating the birth of a particular baby to everyone, everywhere, for ever. We are celebrating because out of the lifeless cold and dark of the universe, and in to the cold and dark of the world, the light of life flares.

This new baby, like all babies, is fragile. Indeed, this new life, like all life, is fragile. It doesn't take much to extinguish it. Fragile life, easily extinguished, is like light itself, a candle flickering in the dark, or a sun flickering in the universe, burning fuel, casting a warm glow out into a dark world and a dark universe. We are celebrating the flare of fragile, flickering life.

Over the past four weeks in this congregation we have been lighting candles. The past four weeks we call Advent. In schools it is called the Christmas Countdown. On each Sunday of Advent, we light a candle – here they are burning. These candles represent four things: peace; hope; love; and joy. We'll light a fifth candle tonight, and it will represent Jesus Christ, that fragile, flickering life born in a manger under a dark sky in to a dark world.

This baby, born in Bethlehem at Christmas, Jesus Christ, grew up to teach that in a cold, dark world where life is like a candle, fragile, flickering life is made less so when those who live, live lives of love; peaceful lives, hopeful lives, lives that seek to bring joy in to the lives of others. Moreover, in a cold, dark, otherwise lifeless universe, this baby born in Bethlehem at Christmas, grew up to teach that if those born in to a cold, dark world live lives lovingly, peacefully, hopefully, joyfully then our lives will feel abundant, whole. Life will feel like it has a quality that has eternal

significance, like it lasts forever.

There's more to the story of Jesus Christ than that of course. This is just his birth story. He will discover that living a loving life, peacefully, hopefully, and with joy is neither easy nor straight-forward. Indeed, in order to teach us just how much love strengthens fragile life, he will choose to put his life in danger, and will lose it. But, that is a story for another season. We tell that story in the Spring over the seasons of Lent and Easter.

But, for tonight, and during tomorrow, let us celebrate life, the birth of new life, of fragile, flickering life born in to a dark, cold world under the sky of a dark, cold universe, and let us light a candle in the darkness.

Then, let us go out in to the world strengthened by the power of light to live loving lives that peacefully show less violence, aggression and anger; that hopefully believe in our capacity as human beings to bring light in to a dark, cold world; that in love recognise the humanity in our neighbours and in our selves; that believe if we bring joy into the lives of other people, we too will find joy ourselves.

Initially, I didn't appreciate what I was seeing. I got back in to the car and drove on, and then it struck me. I stopped my car again on that road between Nazareth and Bethlehem as it climbs up the Wadi Qelt, on the edge of the Judean desert, and I looked up again in to the pitch darkness overhead. You see, as dark as it was, and it was very dark, it wasn't the darkness that made the sky beautiful, it was the stars. The pin pricks of light that filled that sky made it beautiful; each one fragile and flickering, each star so old and so far away that it seemed they had been burning forever, that because they existed the universe would never be the same again.

Go out in to the dark and the cold of Corstorphine this evening, and have a Merry Christmas filled with light and life. And bring into the fragile, flickering lives of the people you will meet tomorrow, love; the peaceful, hopeful, joyful love of Jesus Christ. The love you give will last forever.