

Life is a paradox. The greatest paradox a person can ever have is to experience the darkness where God is. I would invite you at this very moment of pandemic to be experiencing it.

Perhaps it may shock you to hear that there is the darkness where God is and that we are asked to draw near to it. It happened to a person very long time ago. That person is called Moses. Listen to Exodus 20:21, *'The people stand afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.'*

I say it may shock us to hear that because what we normally hear or read from the Bible is *'God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.'* St. Paul exclaims, *'He has rescued us out of darkness into His marvellous light.'*

But in the story of Exodus we read the people of Israel stood afar off from the darkness that overshadowed Mount Sinai, leaving Moses to go on alone into the darkness which looked the abode of doom. But the verse tells us the darkness is where God was.

Life is full of paradoxes, but this morning I ask you to consider the most intriguing paradox. That is to find God in the thick darkness.

First, let us consider the darkness of the world we live in. No one is exempt from the horrible effect of the coronavirus pandemic. All over the world, everywhere is so gloomy! People are queuing up at supermarket, Centrelink etc. The critics of Christianity would have plenty ammunition to fire at us in this present global crisis. You talk about a living and loving God who is the Father of Almighty? You say there is a loving providence? What about thousands and thousands elderly people dying from this virus? What about millions and millions people suddenly out of job? The

critics would say to us, your talk about all being right with the world is shamefully shallow. Where is now your God? Perhaps sitting aloft in some fictitious heaven?’

As the critics point to the happenings in the world, our answer must also be found in the happening of the world. In the first century Palestine, the Roman power ruled supreme. Israel was just a vassal province, a national nonentity, less than the dust beneath Caesar's chariot wheels. Then Israel's politicians were just appeasers, religious leaders become secularists, and Israel's revolutionary leaders were ready for any massacre of the innocents. And there came a Babe in Bethlehem, a carpenter to Nazareth. *‘He came unto His own and His own received Him not.’* The crowd at his trial cried, *‘We have no king but Caesar.’* They unanimously voted for Barabbas against Jesus. So went Jesus to Golgotha and was nailed on a cross. The gospels inform us the sun was hiding its face and darkness was over all the land at noon.

Where was God then? God was veritably present where it seemed no God could possibly be. God was on the Cross. The accursed gallows became the altar of salvation. The act of humanity's uttermost evil became the vehicle of omnipotent love. Not just Moses entered into the darkness where God was. Jesus did the same on the Cross.

Therefore, whatever happened to our contemporary scene, Christians would never be defeatists. God has already reconciled the world to Himself in the darkness of Calvary. The basic fact of the world is not boundary closed, but the rent veil. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are encouraged to lift up our hearts, because we can see God even in the thick darkness of the world.

Second, there is another darkness, a more personal type - the darkness of sin. The Bible tells us people prefer the darkness to light. It is because they hope in the

dark they can hide from God. *'I will make my bed in Sheol,'* cries the man in the psalm, *'I will say, Surely the darkness shall cover me!'* Remember the incident at the Last Supper after the conversation between Jesus and Judas. John the Evangelist says, *'Judas went out - and it was night'*; a welcome night to cover up his stealthily dark design. As soon as Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the bible tells us they hid from God, hiding in the deep shadow of a garden. They thought perhaps God could not find them. People tend to think that no-one, not even our closest friends can ever find out the secret thought and motive that lie deep in our personality.

This is just a vain hope. *'The thick darkness where God was.'* Listen once again to the discomfited man in the psalm, *'I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there!'* There is nothing I can think or say or do in the darkness but the eye of God sees it all.

But as soon as we hear of God's judgment, we behold his mercy and salvation. *'If I make my bed in hell, thou art there'* : that is salvation. Remember Simon Peter after three times denying Jesus, he also went out to cry bitterly in the dark. It was precisely because God was in the darkness that he came through not an outcast but an apostle. It is awful to know that God should know us as we are, but it is also the source of all our hope and blessing and renewal. If I am a denier like Peter, thou art there - my ever-loving Lord! *'The thick darkness where God was.'*

Last but not least, there is the dark valley of all: the darkness of death. One of the mistakes of contemporary view on death is to treat it as a shadow of distant future. The present pandemic is a very good reminder how untrue it is. And if unavoidable we treat it like a beautiful thing. We might treat death so lightly and even

a beautiful thing to do or to attain. But have we not seen on news how loads of trucks carry away the deceased victims of the coronavirus to be cremated without any retinue of family, relatives and friends! The pandemic reveals the stark reality of death.

But the NT says *'death is the last enemy'*; it says it is full of pathos, and finality, and darkness and solitude. *'The people stood afar off.'* Although we see loads of trucks carrying the deceased peoples but let us not be deluded. When it comes to death. We enter it one by one, alone.

Although the NT never beautifies death, it does tell us there is another side of the story of death. The thick darkness where God is! Death has been shattered by the glory of Christ's resurrection. Now is Christ risen from the dead. The valley of the shadow of death has become the gate of heaven.

When Jesus Christ our Lord dying on the cross said his last words, they were: *'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.'* These words can be understood as uttered by a little child saying to her father every night: *'Good night, father, I'll see you again in the morning.'* And then as the child suffered an incurable illness, even in her last night, she still said the same, *'Good night, father, I'll see you in the morning.'* Our Lord once realized His heavenly Father had called him to the mission of the Kingdom of God, He knew that death would be inevitable and unavoidable. I just wonder, perhaps, our Lord every night would pray to His Father the words as he prayed his last on the Cross.

*'The darkness where God is.'* We cannot avoid death. One day it will be our turn. But the comforting thought is Jesus has promised to be there with us. The darkest road with Christ is better than the brightest road without Him. And - as an

early church Father Clement of Alexandria said very beautifully - '*Christ turns all our sunsets into downs.*'