



Sermon Sunday 13th December 2015 'Out of darkness into light'

In the 'busyness' that descends during the Season of Advent its often easy to forget what the real Christmas Story is all about. We are so caught up in all the wonderful preparations to make sure that when we arrive on Christmas Morning all will be perfect that we somehow lose sight of the spirit the incarnation – the Emmanuel – the God with us moment.

Seeing Advent through the eyes of a child can often bring us out of our own darkness into light. Each morning I have been opening an electronic window on the Church of Scotland's virtual Advent Calendar on the 121 web site. For the last 13 mornings it has been a really spiritual start to my day as a different minister shares their wonder of Christmas through verses, poems and quiet reflections. In so doing they share the true meaning of Christmas. Opening a daily window whether for real or in cyber space rekindles many happy childhood memories of this time of year. How clever of the Church to take something precious from ones childhood and make it newly available for an older congregation.

Our readings this morning explore how the darkness can become so pervasive that it is difficult to catch a glimpse of the light when it suddenly appears in the most unexpected places. Indeed Nicodemus found the darkness of the night to be a useful camouflage as he sought to get closer to Jesus without being seen. How often we too hide away our faith finding it easier to operate on the periphery and on the edges of society; believing without being seen or recognised.

In our first Service this morning I was sharing the Christingle Story with the children. They were brilliant helping me make the Christingles and coming up to the front to share their lights with the Congregation. So what is a Christingle you might be asking yourself? Well if we can for a moment see things through the eyes of a child once more then we too might find a few reminders about what to be looking - out for this Christmas in the dark and sad world we often find ourselves living in. Perhaps we need to be like one of Habakkuk's watchmen who called us to worship this morning:

I shall stand at my post, I shall take up my position on the watchtower, keeping a look-out to learn what the Lord says to me.

Habakkuk 2: 1

So as we stand or sit at our posts, taking up our positions in our watchtowers are we ready to learn what the Lord has to say to us through the Christingle ? In true Blue Peter fashion here is one that the children and I made earlier.

It has five component parts each symbolising a different part of the Christmas story.

Orange –Earth

Red Ribbon – Christ's Love and sacrifice

Cocktail sticks - four corners of the world

Sweets - the good things to share

Candle – Christ the light of the world

As we explore its roots we travel to Germany. Germany played a large part in my Christmas preparations last year when I worked closely with the Pastor of the German speaking Evangelischer Church here in Edinburgh to commemorate the Christmas Truce of 1914 at a Service in Loretto School Chapel which brought together students from schools in France, Belgium, Germany and Scotland.

The idea of the Christingle began in the Moravian congregation of Marienborn, Germany, on 20th December, 1747. At a children's service, hymns were sung and the minister, John de Watteville, read verses which the children had written to celebrate the birth of Jesus. He then explained to the children the happiness that had come to people through Jesus,

“who has kindled in each little heart a flame which keeps burning to their joy and our happiness”.

To make the point even clearer, each child then received a little lighted wax candle, tied round with a red ribbon. The minister ended the service with this prayer,

“Lord Jesus, kindle a flame in these children's hearts that theirs like Thine become”.

The Marienborn Diary concludes,

“hereupon the children went full of joy with their lighted candles to their rooms and so went glad and happy to bed”.

If only children were so easily pleased today or perhaps if only parents knew how to share the joy of Christmas in such a simple yet profound way!

The Moravian Church took the custom of this service with them to Labrador and Pennsylvania, to Tibet and Suriname, to the Caribbean and South Africa, and people in each part of the world adapted it for their own use.

No one knows for certain when the word “Christingle” was first used or from what it is derived. Various suggestions have been made. One is that it comes from the old Saxon word “ingle” (fire), meaning “Christ-fire or light”. Another is that it derives from the German “engel” (angel), meaning “Christ-angel”, or it may derive from the German “kindle” (child), meaning “Christ-child”.

The symbolism gradually developed, and today in the Moravian Church in the British Province, the Christingle consists of an orange, representing the world, with a lighted candle to represent Christ, the Light of the World. Nuts, raisins and sweets on cocktail sticks around the candle represent God's bounty and goodness in

providing the fruits of the earth. Red paper, forming a frill around the base of the candle, reminds us of the blood of Christ shed for all people on the cross at Calvary.

In Moravian churches, the Christingle Service is usually held on the Sunday before Christmas or on Christmas Eve. Essentially, it is a children's service, which reminds us that the Christ-child lies at the heart of our Christmas celebrations. The service usually includes the traditional Moravian carol:-

*Morning Star, O cheering sight!
Ere thou cam'st how dark earth's night!
Jesus mine,
In me shine;
Fill my heart with light divine.
Morning star, thy glory bright
Far excels the sun's clear light:
Jesus be
Constantly,
More than thousand suns to me.
Thy glad beams, thou morning star,
Cheer the nations near and far;
Thee we own
Lord alone,
Man's great Saviour, God's dear Son.
Morning star, my soul's true light,
Tarry not, dispel my night;
Jesus mine,
In me shine;
Fill my heart with the light divine.*

At the climax of the service every child receives the gift of a Christingle, reminding us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....." (John 3:16). In this wonderful moment, in the darkened church, the visual symbol of the Christingle expresses the truth that in the darkness of the world there shines a great light.

As I light this candle may it do the same for us this day.

Amen