



PROFUNDUS – SEEKING GOD IN THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL I

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Tonight's homily is the first of three which I will give this January at Night Prayer. The theme this year is 'Profundus – seeking God in the dark night of the Soul'. My motivation for reflecting on this theme this year has been my own personal travails over the past year or more; but my purpose in sharing my personal story is my hope that I may offer an opportunity for each of you to reflect on your own personal journeys over this past year. For each of us life's journey takes us through a geography of mountain peaks and valleys – sometimes the valleys may seem especially dark. Our psalm tonight (77) opened with just such a sense:

I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
At night I stretched out untiring hands,
And I would not be comforted.

The past twelve months have been for me almost the most difficult I have been through in my seventy-five years of life to date. I can't claim to have handled them well, at best I endured them, at worst I allowed life's shadows almost to overwhelm me. The circumstance in which I had found myself saw me as a carer for my mother whose own life journey had become increasingly distressing in physical terms over the past couple of years. I sought to support her as she concluded the most difficult lap of the race of her life. I offered what support I could with the knowledge that my mother's condition was never going to improve but rather continue to deteriorate. This absence of any sense of temporal reward was both an obvious characteristic of such end-of-life care and, as a result, exceptionally exhausting both physically and emotionally for me.

As I said, I can't claim to have handled the circumstances well for I know that, by comparison with situations faced by others to my certain knowledge, those circumstances could well have been even more challenging than they were. But, three months after my mother found peace as she entered eternity, I have found myself reflecting not only on her last lap of life, but also my accompanying her on that journey, as well as the larger issues of how we cope when we find ourselves in dark places where temporal hope is not on offer.

The mental stresses I went through caused me to suffer what I now understand to have been depression. For some months my condition was such that I could only just manage my daily caring responsibilities, nothing more. I dropped out of most of my other duties. At the nadir of my situation, I still had two rostered occasions on which I was to preach. The first I just managed by doing what I had always promised myself I would never do, I recycled a sermon I had given some years previously. However, for the second rostered occasion, I couldn't even do that. With less than twenty-four hours before I was due to preach, I was at such a low point that I sent my colleagues the following message:

Dear Chris and Jenny, I am very sorry to ask at such short notice but could someone stand in for me tomorrow night at Evensong. I have been up half the night stressing about it. I am afraid I am a bit of a basket case at the moment. So sorry. Blessings, Lynn

My ministerial colleagues were wonderful, as were my family and a particularly dear friend who stood by me through this period. I share all this in the hope that there might be some resonance with circumstances which either you may have faced or which others close to you might have been through.

For myself as an ordained minister, I have to tell you, there has also been the feeling of some shame that I could have found myself feeling so bereft in that dark valley of my life. I suppose it was that sense of shame that led me to explore the stories of other ministers through history who found themselves in dark places. Tonight, I want to mention John Wesley.

John Wesley, that amazing preacher had seemed almost single-handedly to change the shape of the church, not just denominationally with the subsequent birth of Methodism, but evangelically through the Great Awakening which occurred in the late C18 and early C19. Yet it would be this same preacher who would, in 1738, write in his journal:

My spirit is troubled.¹

The cause of his trouble? He had been invited by James Oglethorpe the founder of the social experiment which was to become Savannah, Georgia, to come and preach the gospel to the First Nations people. His mission was a failure. Leading up to the quote I just gave, he had written:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.²

On his journey back to Britain, John Wesley had fallen into a depressed state. He had fallen into the *profundus*, that deep well of despair. But sometimes it is there where, paradoxically, we might find a small shaft of light reaching down to us, beckoning us more powerfully than we when bask in the full daylight of certainty. St John of the Cross put it beautifully in his poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*:

That light guided me
More surely than the noonday sun
To the place where He was waiting for me ...

So it was that John Wesley, in the dark place where he had found himself, searched for a shaft of light reaching into the profundus. That light shone on Wesley himself so that he saw himself in a different way to that which he had seen before. He wrote:

It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of

¹ Wesley J, *The Journal of John Wesley: Popular edition condensed Vol.1*, Rev W L Watkinson (introduction), Charles H Kelly, London, 1903, p38.

² Idem.

Christianity; but what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I least of all suspected), that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.³

Thus it was that, through his dark valley of despair, John Wesley learnt a great deal about himself, of his own limits, but also of the rescuing power of that shaft of light that reached out to him; to receive the power of that light, Wesley had to succumb:

I have no hope, but that if I seek I shall find Christ.⁴

Upon returning to Britain, Wesley was to encounter yet another lesson to help him free himself from the dark place in which he had found himself. Wesley, unburdening himself to Peter Böhler, a German visitor to Britain, about his doubts about his own capacity to preach any longer led to this conversation:

Immediately it struck into my mind ‘Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?’ I asked Böhler, whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, ‘By no means.’ I asked, ‘But how can I preach?’ He said, ‘Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith.’⁵

We will now have some moments of reflection whilst Coby Mellor will play the organ. During this time, I invite you to reflect on how St John of the Cross’ words may speak to any dark place where we might find ourselves:

That light guided me
More surely than the noonday sun
To the place where He was waiting for me ...

³ Op.cit., p39

⁴ Op.cit. p40

⁵ Op.cit., pp 43-4