

January 2023: Light and darkness

Throughout December I usually find myself eagerly anticipating the moment when we go past the longest night and the shortest day, and then enjoying each new sign of the lengthening days.

For as long as we have historical records, we know that people across much of the northern hemisphere have celebrated the winter solstice, the point when the sun is 'reborn,' according to ancient traditions, and days begin to get longer. Maybe it feels natural that one of the major Christian celebrations should evolve from these earlier celebrations?

Christians have not always celebrated Christmas. The date of December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth was first suggested in 221, by the historian Sextus Julius Africanus, and soon became the universally accepted date. But the first record of Christians observing Christmas is over a century later, from Rome in 336. Christmas did not become popular among Christians until the 9th century. In the modern church, Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the 'light of the world,' is followed a couple of weeks later on January 6 by Epiphany (which means 'revelation,') when Christians celebrate the revealing of the light of Christ to the magi, led to Jesus by a star.

In our modern world, with our ready access to energy and light, it is easy for us to miss the significance of using light as a symbol of God's presence and goodness. I experienced a little of how powerful this image may have seemed to ancient peoples when I visited the poorer regions of south India as a curate. We spent 5 days on tea plantations in a tiger reserve, and as our guides hurried us anxiously back to minibuses as the light faded, because of the dangers of unseen wild elephants and leopards in pitch blackness, and as we huddled under thin blankets in near zero temperatures, longing for the return of the sun's warmth, I certainly understood something of the image of light as representing all that is safe and good.

So as our world turns, and here in the UK we move towards longer days and spring growth, I encourage you to reflect on what helps you to 'picture' the goodness that Christians believe is behind the universe, the goodness Christians call 'God,' the goodness Christians believe was made especially visible to us through the life and death of Jesus Christ. And if the image of light and dark does not 'work' for you, my prayer is that you will find an image that does.

Yours in Christ,
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