



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Blessèd Darkness"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Genesis 2:4b-9,15-17,25-3:7
Second Reading Romans 5:12-19
Gospel Matthew 4:1-11

From the private writings of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "If I ever become a saint- I will surely be one of 'darkness'. I will continually be absent from heaven- to light the light of those in darkness on earth."

The church is dark in Lent. There used to be Christmas lights up at the altar until last week, and the red and green banners are now replaced with the somber and sometimes disturbing Stations of the Cross. The clergy wear purple, black, red...dark colors. And the readings and prayers talk about sin and temptation and penitence: those aren't exactly "feel good" themes, are they? Outside the church, it is bright and hot. Inside, it's dark and cool- but not like a tropical pool in the forest- here we're dealing with a somber atmosphere of something like mourning: mourning for Jesus' sufferings, mourning for our sins.

Now, some people might wonder why on earth the Church should want to cultivate depression that way. Isn't life dark enough as it is without almost "celebrating" it? My answer is that the Church isn't trying to be depressing by treating the five weeks of Lent as something other than fun, frolic and fantasy. This is the time of year when

we get a large dose of reality. It is also the time when we get in touch with our humanity and our own darkness.

There are many kinds of darkness, both good and bad. The "bad" can go back to one's childhood. I know that I was terribly afraid of the dark as a child and insisted not only that the light be left on, but that a radio play softly in the background, too! Fear of the dark is a basic human response to the unknown- the things lurking just outside the clan's cave or the village campfire- the "things that go bump in the night" that still cause us to wake up with a start here in the 21st century. Darkness is also used to describe ignorance. Those who don't know are "in the dark", and that which is difficult to understand is "obscure" meaning in the shadows. Being left in the dark, particularly for children, brings fear of abandonment and betrayal- at least it did for me. The dark is a place of danger, fear and death.

But think then of the darkness that envelopes us when we finally turn off the night and roll over to go to sleep. Think of the blessing of a dark, cool room after a day in the Manila sun. Some darkness can be good, but it's not the first response we have to it.

God's darkness is something that mystics and theologians have written about for centuries. The Eastern fathers of the Church experienced God not only in what He did and who He was, but also in what He was not. Apophatic theology defined God by the darkness, the vacuum, the God-shaped space that could not be truly described without compromising the essential "otherness" of the Supreme Being.

For others, like the Spanish mystic John of the Cross, the journey of the individual Christian believer might well include a time of feeling abandoned and ignored by God. He called this "the Dark Night of the Soul" and experienced it himself. It was a terrible time for St John, but through it he came to appreciate what God was like in His essence, not just as a Giver and a Do-er, but also as one who simply "is" God.

This year's Lenten Study is going to focus on a new book that appeared last September and caused a great deal of controversy. The private writings of Mother Teresa of Calcutta were never meant to be read- Teresa begged anyone connected with them to destroy them at her death. For the sake of many Christians, her spiritual advisors did not grant her request, and the book "Come Be My Light" is the result. What surprised and disappointed many people about this book are the passages in which Teresa talks about her sense of God's absence- a darkness in which she doesn't feel God's support or companionship. Perhaps most shocking is not the existence of such a "dark night" of this saintly soul, but the fact that in her case it lasted most of her life, and was strongest and most painful for her at the very times when she was most active in her self-sacrificial service to the poor in India.

While some were scandalized by this book, others were relieved. It wasn't that they were seeing the sordid side of a celebrity that can assuage the envy we might feel towards the rich, the famous and the beautiful. Rather, in Teresa's case, we are given the insight into a soul altogether like most of ours- a saint for those searching for God, not comfortably ensconced in a fantasy world of piety and devotion where everything is just too perfect. Mother Teresa seemed to sense that if her life were to be held up as an example, as it indeed has been, she would become the "saint of darkness". (*Come Be My Light* p. 230)

It is perhaps too much to thank God for darkness- that might be just too much for us who have such strong ideas about what darkness represents, and the inner fears and insecurities that the dark evokes in us. But as a priest friend of mine once preached:

"God speaks from the midst of the storm. Perhaps we ought to be somewhat more critical of our hunger for security. ... God remains God. Does not our Lord's life and ministry have something to say about our pursuit of control? ... It is a very human inclination to fill in the blanks, to establish for ourselves a too impervious and constant knowing. However, this is an inclination which needs to be evaluated with great care. The way of grace is a way of openness. Openness leads us to accept the course of our journey of faith, including times of disruption- accepting also times of

the absence and silence of God. Better the absence of the true God than the presence of an idol; better God's silence than words we put in God's mouth."

-Fr Adam Linton, "From the East Gate"

To those of you who, like me, have been and still are afraid of the dark, or perhaps are deeply concerned about the shades and shadows in your relationship with God when others seem to bask in the constant light of His presence- let me make one more observation about the need of darkness. One of the blessings of living here on the Holy Trinity compound is that at night, if one positions himself just right in relationship to the surrounding trees and blocks off the intruding high-rises on the horizon, he can see big patches of the night sky with thousands of stars, many of them brand new to an old North American like myself: constellations and galaxies and stars of colors one can't really describe. And you know what? You can only see them at night and in the dark.

From Psalm 139: "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me turn to night,' darkness is not dark to you, O Lord; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike."