

There are many forms of darkness. Do you remember that dark room that you could never enter as a child alone? For myself it was the darkness at the top of a flight of stairs – the way to bed – but I had a brother who I could go with and we would rush through the darkness to the safety of our beds; the darkness was all right once in there; we had our teddies and our dreams.

And we have the darkness of these long, dull days covered in cloud but once again enlivened by people. And the darkness of depression, or of madness, or of imprisonment and torture. I have before me several accounts of seemingly unbearable darkness: the writer Angus Wilson descending into the darkness of Alzheimer's; Etty Hillesum facing death in Auschwitz; Barbara Brown Taylor, another writer, but this time facing the darkness of writer's block when the words lie down and die:

'like ants in a poisoned anthill: little black bodies everywhere, their legs curled up like burnt whiskers. I poked at them and they did not move. They were certainly dead and I was nowhere near finished, so I pushed them around on the page, hoping they might still be made to work. I arranged their bodies this way and that, moving whole paragraphs of stiff words from one page to another, but it was no use. There was no life left in them, and still I could not stop because I was afraid that if I stopped I would fall into a hole I could not climb out of. What was in that hole? I did not know and I did not want to know. It was dark down there and there was no light in me. That was when I knew I was in trouble'.

(Learning to Walk in the Dark p. 79)

'There was no light in me' – this is when darkness turns into despair and all the wise nostrums: 'leave the house; go for a walk; call a friend; take a shower,' are wise no more. It is the darkness of death which all these lesser darknesses are merely flagging up; the darkness of being alone in a universe without meaning.

When Jesus approaches Peter and Andrew, James and John, their lesser darkness is the occupation and subjugation of their land by a foreign power, but Jesus is going to lead them on a way that tackles the ultimate darkness of death which no one can avoid and which no earthly happiness can evade. All around us is a desperate attempt to cling to a happiness which inevitably passes, though Thomas Merton brings his novices up short with the telling phrase, 'There is no obligation to happiness.' That isn't what it's actually about. Jesus isn't saying to Peter and Andrew and James and John: 'Follow me and you'll be happy,' but 'Follow me and I'm going to show you a way which may or may not make you happy in this life but will certainly make you happy in the next. And I'm going to do it by being with you in all the trials and temptations of being human, including that ultimate trial of death. What I'm teaching you is to place your trust in another, in a God who will not fail you whatever darkness you are in. In this sense, attaching ourselves to this denomination or that, to this party or person or that, to this personal happiness or that, is simply one more evasion.'

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Good News, and not to preach that in terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed.

We are not alone in death, or any other darkness – and this is where we will find our joy, learning to walk in the dark.

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