

*The people that walked in darkness  
has seen a great light:  
on those who live in a land of deep shadow  
a light has shone.*

We looked to the skies for a conjunction of planets but rain came instead. Br Herbert remarked on Wednesday that he'd never seen the day so dark, and this led me to remember a full eclipse of the sun which passed down the channel just South of us in 1999, and as the penumbral shadow took hold we could trace its path, not only by the darkening sky but by the street lights coming on, in succession, from West to East along the South shore of the Isle of Wight their photoelectric (or photodiode) cells being triggered as if it were nightfall. And this line of thought leads me to another remembrance, this time of a wonderful Aurora Borealis lighting up the night sky over Guildford in 1989 and so to a recent report of a scientist in Alaska recording, not only the sight of such an Aurora, but its sound, and of an Alaskan composer turning this into music – music resembling that of 'whales whistling, frogs calling or the chirp of an alien bird' in the words of the naturalist Patrick Barkham. We look to the stars and find music and (this shouldn't be a surprise but is) the sound of music both by day and by night.

Now, it's long been acknowledged that we celebrate Christ's birth at almost the darkest time of the year, (here, in the North, close to the shortest day) because it has always been a significant time for us: that bleak mid-winter time when only inductive reasoning can assure us that the sun will rise again, that the days will lengthen and new harvests will be possible. So it's a time ripe for human analogy and especially this year because of the coincidence with many other dark moments. And as the 'music of the spheres' struck one commentator as wondrous because it could also be heard by day, we too should know that this birth of a God-child, in the darkness and poverty of Bethlehem, is a sign for us that, whatever darkness we may be feeling and experiencing, now, there is a deeper melody at play which may be hidden from sight by night but is always present to those who have the ears to hear, both by day and by night. It's not really about 'presents' but 'presence' – the unwrapping of a gift which has never gone away – a Word made flesh which eclipses every other source of human meaning. Only some can hear it, and some not.

*All that came to be had life in him  
and that light was the light of man,  
a light that shines in the dark,  
a light that darkness could not overpower.*

Br John Mayhead  
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour