

We were privileged last night to have a three year old and a five year old and a hundred year old all together in the same room – you can imagine how noisy that was, especially from the hundred year old, with all three performing gymnastics between the chairs, or at least attempting to do so. It was a delight to be there and stretched the saeculum, the living connection that is from 1835 the birthday of a great grand relative Brother Herbert met as a child, onwards to who knows, perhaps 2121. Who knows? For we live, as ever, in dark times with numerous threats on the horizon and more immediately in the dark days of December. We want light, hope, sunshine again. This is a very primal and universal experience no better expressed than in the fear and awe that go with an eclipse. We've referenced this before when I was only on the edge of a total eclipse watching the lights progressively going on from west to east on the Isle of Wight, but it was impressive enough. The writer Helen McDonald was fortunate to be down in Cornwall on that day within the zone of totality – it was cloudy but still impressive enough. She dislikes crowds but was willing to endure them for the sake of the experience; and found herself moved in a way entirely unexpected

'As the crowds that lined the Atlantic shore raised cameras to commemorate totality, and as they flashed, a wave of particulate light crashed along the dark beach and flooded across to the other side of the bay making the whole coast a glittering field of stars. Each fugitive point of light was a different person. I laughed out loud; I'd wanted a solitary revelation but had been given something else instead: an overwhelming sense of community and of what it is made – a host of individual lights shining briefly against oncoming darkness.'

This is us in the face of the Absolute, many but one, or, as Helen McDonald also puts it:

'When you stand and watch the death of the sun and see it reborn there can be no them, only us.' (Vesper Flights, p74-5)

We may forget in our Catholicism that catholicism with a small 'c' also matters, and is indeed the prior and primary reference for it – the hope that we hold out for others is not that of a clique rescued from the 'massa dammata' as Augustine put it but of a particular experience of the universal which is meaningful for us all; that is all of humanity sharing this experience of darkness and in need of a light and a child and the sense of community and the hope that that brings – a saeculum stretching back to the beginning of time and onwards to its end.

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