

'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
What hours. What black hours we have spent  
This night! What sights you, heart, saw, ways you went!  
And more must, in yet longer lights' delay.'

From the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who struggled much with depression and read today not to depress you, further perhaps, but to highlight the contrast and promise of Christ as the light who enlivens, as the radiant light of God's glory, as the one who enters our darkness and, not necessarily to do away with it but to live in it for us, to be in it with us, to be, in the words of another depressive, 'A patch of light with enough space to live in.' Momentary perhaps but memorable and life-changing. All this occasioned by the string of dark events that surround us, chase us down, continue to haunt us – and one could make much of them as the media is wont to do to depress us further. But Christmas takes us much further than that; brings light into this darkness not as in a momentary escape, the thrill of the new, in buying and trading gifts, the sudden relaxation that good food and company brings – all good in its own way but inadequate – possible to rehearse at any time. No, Christmas presents us with the stark victory of the Christ child destined to conquer darkness by living in it to the full.

On a walk to Jerusalem to highlight the plight of the Palestinians Justin Butcher and some of his party divert to Venice and visit an exhibition of paintings entitled 'Exodus' by a Bosnian artist Sabet Zec who knows all about exile from Sarajevo and in one of his paintings depicts the tiny body of a child washed up on a beach – 'it's little Alan, the migrant boy, lying face down, drowned on the shore of the Mediterranean at Bodrum' ,but rather than shown in that vivid red shirt of the now famous and heart-rending photograph we all know from the news, Zec shows him in white against a very dark background with a ' thin and almost imperceptible' line of red lace trickling like blood from the little boy's sleeve and forming a line of script before travelling to link all the other paintings in the exhibition and all of us and Christ. For the words sum it up ' Caro Alan... non sei solo!?' – Dear Alan....you are not alone!?' And what saves this from idle sentimentality is that link through the other figures depicted to Christ who literally shares our blood and sheds it for us. We can have no better understanding of how light conquers darkness than that.

Works quoted: Martin Laird 'Ocean and Light', Justin Butcher: 'Walking to Jerusalem'

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