

## **A Lamplighter in the Darkness**

*Midnight Mass 2019 sermon (Rev Alan Stewart)*

‘Darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it’

Mr Scrooge may have loved the dark for tight-fisted reasons, but not everyone does. For some the nights are too long, and too full of loneliness and of things that go bump. (*bump!*)

We often use the word ‘darkness’ as shorthand for the unknown; The Dark Ages; or as another way of talking about evil; the Dark Side, or for those dark places in which we sometimes find ourselves, like grief.

And yet, without the dark, would we even know what the light is?

Some things, of course, can only ever be seen in the dark, like stars; and fireworks. And certain things only grow in the dark, like bulbs; and babies. Some things can only truly be appreciated in the dark, like candlelight.

My favourite ever Christmas Eve was spent in a power-cut where, as a family, we had to re-discover the simple joys of conversation and board games by candlelight.

I remember once walking into a huge black velvet-lined box in the Tate Modern and it was the deepest darkness I’d ever experienced. Even with time, my eyes couldn’t adjust. And as I stepped slowly and cautiously and a little fearfully into that unknown, I was forced to trust my other senses and to trust that there was an end to the darkness before I could turn around and walk back towards the light.

Some things can best be learned in the dark, like trust, and hope.

Hope has got to be the most beautiful word we have, because without hope, what have we? Over time it's got a bit lost in translation; become another way of saying 'wishful thinking'; 'fingers-crossed'.

True hope, however, is trusting that there is an end to the darkness before we turn around and walk back towards the light. And, for the Christian, this hope is to be located in a Person; in a child born in the dark, come as a light for the world.

A baby is such a universal and powerful symbol of hope. I remember when I held each of my children in my arms for the first time, and, alongside that indescribable and fiercely protective love, I felt I had something new to live for.

Hope is having something, someone, to live for.

On 22 November 2017, in a Leicester hospital a baby girl was born prematurely holding her own miniature heart in her tiny perfect hands. Venellope was born without a breastbone, with her heart outside of her body. And in those first three weeks of her life she underwent three major operations to put her tiny heart back where it belonged. The condition ectopia cordis is extremely rare, and no other cases are known in the UK where a baby has survived. But she did, spending her first Christmas and the next 12 months in hospital, and is now preparing to celebrate her third Christmas at home. Her parents rightly called her their little miracle and chose for her the middle name Hope, because of the fight within this little one to survive.

For her parents, this little girl embodies a hope that holds on despite the odds. For the Christian, Christ, this child we dare to believe to be God Incarnate, in human form, embodies an even greater hope. Because, for us, this is God with us and God for us and the God who promises that, whatever happens, he will

hold on to us. It's a hope that knows there is a light that never goes out; a light stronger than any darkness.

One of my favourite writers, Anne Lamott, says, 'Hope begins in the dark'.

There's a beautiful story you may have heard told by the famous nineteenth Century novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. As a boy, he would sit gazing out of the window of his parents' home, watching the evening shadows fade and dusk give way to darkness. He was particularly fascinated by the lamplighter, who each night would wander down the street lighting the gas lamps one by one. It's said that on one occasion he was so excited that he shouted to his nanny; 'Look, there's a man coming down the street punching holes in the darkness'.

Centuries before, another lamplighter was born to later walk through city streets and along shorelines and into ordinary homes and ordinary lives, punching holes in the darkness.

Because darkness actually is paper thin compared with the light. Because Hope is a Person; and that same lamplighter calls each one of us to light lamps, to punch holes in darkness, to embody hope for others. How? Well, let's start by speaking up for those who are denied a voice; by campaigning for those who need justice; by sitting with those who need company; by holding out a hand to those who need holding onto.

The One who called himself the Light of the world also once looked into the faces of the ordinary and rejected and said, 'You, too, are the light of this world'.

And, centuries later, he says the same to you, to me. 'You are a light for this world; an embodiment of hope'.

On this Holy Night, where heaven seems to touch earth, can we reflect again on Hope, the Person; this Jesus who that first Christmas became a tiny vulnerable child holding the heart of God in their hands, the same Jesus who comes even now holding a gift called hope, taking our hand in the uncertainty, whispering the song of the future, reminding us over and over again that despite how everything seems, love and peace and truth will prevail. On this precious night, can we lay aside our need to be in control, or to be sure or to be right; can we dare to trust the lamplighter enough to invite him into the dark corners of our world, beginning with our own lives?