

We've had some fantastic morning recently

About 100 years ago the poet Edward Thomas wrote

The glory of the **beauty** of the morning, -
The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;
The blackbird that has found it, and the dove
That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;

Something sweeter than love – what could that be?

- he means the pure beauty of nature

He says

The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning
All I can ever do, all I can be

This comes very near to a sense of God; beauty, glory, humility – but it finally
excludes him This beauty which wrenches his soul finally remains at distance -
excludes him, and leads to despair

shall I ask at the day's end once more
What beauty is, and what I can have meant
By happiness.

Edward Thomas wrote much lovely nature poetry, at the beginning of the first
world war; at 37 years old, with a family, he volunteered – and was killed
within weeks of arriving at the desolation of the western front.

We all live with an extreme tension – the extreme tension between the glory and
beauty of the things of this world – and it's darkness and violence.

The more deeply moved you are by loveliness beauty, truth and goodness,
perhaps the more sensitive you will be to the suffering, ugliness and corruption
of this world.

In scripture we have the two statements – psalm 33:5

the earth is full of God's unfailing love.

And its antithesis

the whole world lies in the evil *one*.1 John 5:19

How do we live with the glory of this world; those things wrench our hearts, that evoke in us longing, yearning, glory, beauty, seeking, truth, the infinite, the divine

they humble us because they transcend us – but they remain beyond

how reconcile them with the world's sickening and frightening violence, what we see on our tv news each day.

In three weeks' time we come to – Good Friday and Easter. Lent is the right time to face such difficult issues, for it recalls us to when Jesus went up to Jerusalem, to bear witness, knowing the certainty of suffering, and the dark tomb

Darkness - and light. Suffering – and joy.

The gospel tells us that the light has come; but the world is trouble because the people love darkness because their deeds are evil.

Light and darkness – the light attracts us; but the darkness is in us

We invest a great deal in minimising this; our friends and family help maintain the fiction that we are all jolly nice people. A bit like the fiction that New Zealand is a wonderfully safe place to live, - and if there is an earthquake, well it probably won't be here. Our family circles are sometimes torn apart by emotional earthquakes, bitter divorces, angry feuds, neglect. Put us under strong pressure, and who knows what darkness might surface in us

Is there hope – or Edward Thomas's despair.

St John writes, God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.

The word **gave** is very significant. It not just sent. Jesus might have been sent to be a wonderful example, a fount of wisdom, a source of light. Yes he was this; we hear his words; do not judge people, and you will not be judged; take the branch out of your own eye before you take the speck out of another's eye; forgive and you will be forgiven'

and we see people respond to him, drawn by the tenderness, the respect, the acceptance they find in; drawn too by the holiness they see in him; remember how a woman of the streets came and kissed his feet in gratitude; how he defended her from the self-righteous religious purists.

He was sent to us yes; yes; but more he was given – he was made ours, released from God to us, handed over into our world, our care. And what did we do? We handed him over to the Romans to crucify him.

Did anyone actually prove faithful in the crisis; just a few women, two or three men. But the disciples ran away; and the crowd cried crucify.

And yet this was so we should be saved.

God set up this most strange sign for us; the son of God upon the cross. This is the way to Easter Sunday – through Good Friday. Here sin is forgiven; here reconciliation made between God and humanity; from here, new life and light flow from God.

Nowhere else in the religious thought of the whole world is there room for the shame of a cross. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, robbers and rebels; to be flogged, stripped, nailed up, naked, in public, to die in the extremity of distress, this was common in the ancient world for criminals – but very few writers refer to it– it was almost unmentionable disgraceful. Jesus Christ underwent this for you and me.

It was and remains a difficult message to preach, and to hear. The bible calls it a scandalon, an offence – such a thing should not, could not happened to the holy one. But it is the point of meeting of God and humanity; where Christ takes on himself the darkness for us. In Jesus God came to us at the extreme place of human wretchedness and reveals what glory really is – it is love taking our place. Jesus, representing all of us, gives his life to God; and by entrusting ourselves to Jesus we too live in light and love.

To illustrate the point, the gospel tells us, that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up

This strange, ancient, healing sign from far back in Israel's history – the poisonous snake on the pole, is compared with the Cross, where also the most horrible and fearful thing is actually the source of life for us.

The snake sign was lifted up; Christ was lifted up in suffering on the cross. But those who looked to the sign of the serpent were healed in desert; it was pure faith and trust that God would keep his promise of healing. And for us, it is faith and trust that Jesus has done this thing for us that heals and saves us from darkness.

It is we now who lift up Christ - lift him up in thanks and worship, in praise and gratitude, in witness, in living out his love and goodness and care, in faith and love.

We began with the words of a fine, sensitive poet, Edward Thomas

He said, The glory of the **beauty** of the morning, - -
tempts me on to something sweeter than love;

Tempts is the right word -for we cannot go beyond love – the love that lays down life for friends, the love of God that gives his son for us. The glory of beauty is captive to time; it decays. It has no answer to ugliness and evil – it merely rebukes them.

But Christ has come from God to do for us what we could not do for ourselves; and having taken upon himself the ugliness and evil of the world, and conquered by his perfect offering of himself, he now lives to bring us light. Light and darkness –

Jesus clears our vision, lets us see that that is alternative

all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

that is what drives a world without God

Yet the earth is full of witness to the glory of God

And those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

We come by turning and by trusting the one who has overcome evil at its root; who has triumphed on the cursed tree; who is risen on the third day; who lives to pray for us. Amen