

## How Bright is the Light of the World?

MARTIN HENRY

**T**HE WORDS from the prophet Isaiah – ‘The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light’ (Is 9:2) – were characteristically applied by some of the evangelists to Jesus, as in Matthew 4:16 or Luke 1:79. In such passages, Jesus is identified as the light that came to illuminate the darkness of the world. And the effect of that light the evangelists describe in terms that, by dint of constant repetition over the centuries, have become very familiar. Attracted by Jesus, the light of the world, people left important and secure jobs in order to follow him. They obviously believed Jesus had more to offer them than what even a good and useful job could provide.

And the light Jesus brought also affected the health of many of those he met. People were cured of illness and sickness, and given the possibility of enjoying life once again or perhaps for the first time. The ‘Good News’ brought by Jesus, the light of the world, was, then, not only a matter of encouraging words and insights, but it included encouraging actions as well that transformed lives.

The words and actions of Jesus made tangible what he meant when he said: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mt 4: 17). Yet if we examine that announcement carefully: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand,’ we’ll see that it contains a possible snag. Because ‘at hand’ is not quite the same thing as ‘fully present here and now.’ To say: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand,’ is not, in other words, the same thing as saying: ‘The world is now the kingdom of God.’

Jesus, Christian faith teaches, was indeed the divine light that came into the world and illuminated it. But for all the enthusiasm he gener-

ated among his followers, and for all the healing of bodies and souls he managed to effect in the course of his relatively short ministry, the darkness of the world remained. And it still remains and continues to be in stark contrast to the light Jesus was believed to be, in ways that don’t need to be spelt out: they are spelt out sufficiently clearly every day in any news bulletin one cares to listen to, or any newspaper one chooses to read.

Where then, we might well ask, does that leave the light of the ‘Good News’? Is it just one half of an equation, with the darkness of the world being the other half, and will the struggle between the two just go on for ever? It often seems that way, because, while darkness and evil cannot destroy goodness, neither can any amount of goodness expel evil definitively from the world, it would seem.

All that is certainly undeniable, but it may not be such a big a problem for Christian faith as is sometimes made out. Christianity never said or never promised that Christ’s victory over sin, evil, and death would rid the world from his day onwards of all darkness. What Christianity did and does teach and promise us is that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we have the possibility also – like Jesus – of winning out finally against all the forces of darkness and destruction we can see around us in the world, and indeed in ourselves.

### STRUGGLE

Christian faith also, however, suggests that this victory will only be won after a struggle with the powers of evil. And that’s maybe, I think, why horror films, for instance, are so popular. For they usually portray in different ways the struggle between the power of good and the power of evil, and show how, in the end, goodness does win out. In other words: goodness, people perhaps instinctively grasp, is only really genuine goodness when it has actually encountered, engaged with, and overcome the forces of evil. If it were otherwise, if goodness were in fact never put to the test, maybe it wouldn’t be genuine goodness at all, but just wishful thinking, however well-intentioned.

And if Christianity had promised people the perfection of the kingdom of God, the perfection of heaven, both here and hereafter, without

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Martin Henry is a lecturer in systematic theology at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

any struggle, who could have resisted, who could have refused such an offer?<sup>1</sup> But that's not what Christianity teaches, and it's certainly not the way life is. As regards the way life is, a 'basic insight' of the Christian message is precisely 'that happiness is an escape from reality.'<sup>2</sup> This sombre truth, in Kolakowski's words, 'runs through the entire history of philosophy and religion and has not only metaphysical but psychological authenticity.'<sup>3</sup>

What Christian faith does teach, on the other hand, what the 'good news,' the gospel, constantly proclaims, is that in the goodness of Jesus we have the assurance of a divine reality that, while it cannot make evil disappear, can always successfully resist and finally overcome the darkness of the world.

'The kingdom of God is at hand.' But we will only see the full dawn-ing of that kingdom after we have gone through, what St Augustine once called, the night of this world.

1. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 40.

2. *Religion*, p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*

***The purpose of politics*** – *The concept of the common good gives a clear definition of the purpose of politics, the centrality of justice and equity in any form of governance, and the need for those in power to pay special attention to the more vulnerable members of society, i.e., those who are at a disadvantage in terms of defending their rights and advocating their legitimate interests. In suggesting a response that will chart a way forward to a renewed Ireland, there is nothing abstract or opaque about proposing a vision that is grounded in the concept of the common good. What must not be forgotten is that reference to seeking to promote the common good forms part of the preamble to Bunreacht na hÉireann and this current crisis calls us back to re-examine that constitutional commitment to 'the dignity and freedom of the individual ... and true social order'.*

From Crisis to Hope: Working to Achieve the Common Good, *Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference*