

## Seeing in the Dark

*Accompanying people through times of struggle and uncertainty*

The Christian spiritual tradition uses a range of imagery to explore how God meets us within experiences of struggle and confusion. The people who used these images had their own challenges and wanted to make sense of them in the context of their relationship with God. They also wanted to provide support and guidance for others travelling the same road. A picture expresses experience in a way that words alone cannot; it gives us another way of viewing what is happening and what our response might be.

### Some false starts:

#### **Suffering is God-given punishment for sin**

Suffering may sometimes be the *consequence* of our actions but is not *punishment*. The story of Job illustrates how innocent people suffer as much as those who do evil.

#### **God brings about difficulty in our lives so that we can grow**

When we are hurting and don't know why, we may well blame God. However, suffering is part of the warp and weft of life. In Christ our 'Good Fridays' become unexpected Easter days, but not usually in the sense that difficulty is taken away; rather we become able to integrate these experiences and even draw life from them.

#### **Suffering is a good in itself, and so something to seek out**

We do not need to make our own pain; pain finds us within the natural course of life. God is not an ogre who desires our suffering and is pleased with our misery, even if at times, this is what we might feel!

#### **Suffering is a departure from the normal**

Culturally we have moved to a place where health, youth, vitality, success, and the ability to have control over one's circumstances are projected as not just desirable but somehow 'normal', ignoring the fact that we do get unwell, grow older, meet failure and often experience a sense of powerlessness. Because of this when we do suffer, we feel more isolated – as if we have fallen off the map of how life is supposed to be.

## We are victims of fate – God's will is unalterable and fixed

There is not a single blueprint for each person's life - a single route to be taken, intended by God. God 'is', within the place where we are, and the place where we are, is always the place where God begins from.

### Some starting points:

**Struggle and difficulty are a natural part of the rhythm of life** Rather than begin with the assumption that life should be easy we embrace the reality that it is often difficult. Instead of believing that 'good' behaviour deserves reward we accept that 'good' and 'bad' experience difficulty in equal measure.

#### **We experience growing pains:**

Growing up into love is ultimately liberating and healing, but can be difficult. We have to unlearn engrained attitudes. We have to take the risk of trust if our relationships are going to deepen and become genuinely mutual.

**The place of mystery in our lives:** We can't reduce life, or God, or ourselves to what can be contained and wholly explained. Mystery is about confronting a reality that we cannot control or comprehend. Sometimes this experience awakens our wonder and joy, for beauty is 'mysterious'. But the difficulty of letting go into mystery is also one of the roots of our pain.

**The place of paradox:** The bible is full of paradox: life is gained through death, lordship is shown in service, the last shall be first, we give to receive, the humble are exalted, the power of God is shown in weakness. The deepest truths cannot be told in straight lines: this is why poetry and visual imagery figures so greatly within the bible and spiritual writing.

#### **Meeting life as it is:**

The Christian tradition affirms the cross as the place where God, vulnerably, generously embraces life as it is, with its messy mix of joy and pain, and by so doing transforms it. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not an answer. Instead, Jesus lives with our questions. He endures our limitations and experiences our defeats. In him we see God and humanity together traverse this unknowing darkness.

## Night: [John of the Cross]

- Loss of sight
- Not being able to manage or understand our experience
- Fear of the unknown
- Darkness that we choose and darkness that overwhelms us through circumstance
- Living within the bounds of what we can comprehend and control is only half-life
- In darkness and secure: deepening relationship through trust
- Moving beyond the limited and into the infinite
- Letting go, and stepping out.
- The dazzling darkness of God – superabundance of light
- Befriending mystery



## Seasons [Hadewijch]

- Seasons of the earth
- Seasons within our experience
- Dormancy
- Emergence
- Flourishing
- Fall
- Discerning the season and its invitation
- Stillness within movement: God's constancy of purpose, creativity, love. Our response in generous trust, attentiveness, daring.
- Waiting and working

## Jacob wrestling

[Gerard Manley Hopkins/ George Herbert]

- A meeting at night
- At a river crossing – a boundary between one life and another
- Jacob does not let go; nor does the stranger
- A new name
- Limping, but blessed.
- Pouring out what is in our hearts
- Going beyond niceness / polite distance to the real...the meeting.
- Questioning, challenging
- Yet holding, and being held.
- The lack of answers but the reality of presence
- Faith expressed as doubt
- Faith as the choice to trust rather than the feeling of security.

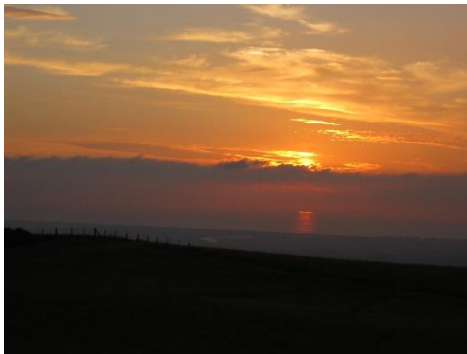


We each of us had fallen down into meaning, if we cared to seek it out, and to climb with it out of that awful chasm into which we had been toppled. The experience of love was the stepladder up which we could climb

[Brian Keenan: *An Evil Cradling*]

### **Falling down** [Julian of Norwich]

- The pain of falling – woundedness
- Feeling ‘low’ ‘down’ – a ‘fall from grace’
- Destructiveness and its impact
- All will be well – but how?
- No anger in God; the gaze and activity of Love
- Adam’s fall and Christ’s fall – Christ and humankind cannot be divided.
- Julian of Norwich’s parable of the Lord and Servant
- The soul’s medicine: contrition, compassion and sincere longing for God
- Christ’s rising and our rising.



### **Meeting and Separation:** [Simone Weil, Mother Teresa, John of the Cross]

- Two forms of friendship: meeting and separation
- Joy of meeting and pain of separation as one love
- Another gravity – our restlessness
- Deepening of longing and seeking
- The discovery that One seeks us
- A grown up love
- The experience of meeting within separation

### **In the wilderness**

[William Williams, Elijah, Israel, Ezekiel]

- The vast, empty, wild place – untamed...beyond our map of the known
- The inbetween place – between ending and beginning
- Hindsight may see meaning; but in the moment our experience is of being lost.
- No path, no signpost
- Testing and knowing of the heart
- The noise we hear in silence
- A place of encounter – with self and with God
- A place for the forming of identity and the making of choice
- A pillar of fire, water from the rock, bread from the sky



### **Set free from the slave-drivers**

[Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises]

- Patterns of thought and behaviour that confine
- The freedom of God’s invitation
- Consolation and desolation
- Where do our impulses lead us?
- The tone of the Spirit’s ‘voice’

### **Fruit from the tree**

- Cross or crucifix...or the mystery of both held together?
- We doubt and trust
- We struggle against God and hold onto God
- In darkness we move beyond the limits of light
- We experience meeting and separation as one love
- We are lost in a wilderness and are journeying home
- We are fallen Adam and risen Christ – one undivided person
- We are moving into constancy through changing seasons

## **The Support we need**

*Spiritual direction through difficult times*

### **Night:**

Those who guide others through night will encourage them to trust rather than fight the darkness. They bid those they accompany to take up the adventure of the beauty and richness that lies hidden in the dark, and to curb their instinct to flee to the safety of the nearest man-made light.

### **Wrestling with God**

Those who struggle with God like Jacob need to be given permission to say it how it is. We cannot make ourselves feel trustful and at peace amidst difficulty, if what is really going on for us is fear and turmoil. It is better to own what we feel, and then we can begin to listen to God. The relationship has to be real or it is nothing. Those in a difficult place may need reassurance that questions and doubts do not negate faith; in many ways they are the substance of faith.

**Falling Down** Those who feel themselves to have fallen and so find it hard to forgive themselves, have need of acceptance. Though falling hurts, it does not separate us from God, who gladly chooses in Christ to fall into our difficulties, knowing we need that help. The encouragement we need is to avoid becoming overly self-absorbed and so mired in misery. Instead, we need someone to remind us to gaze at God who bids us welcome.

**The Seasons** Each fresh challenge asks us: 'What time is it?' Is this the season to endure, patiently waiting whilst doing the little that remains in our power? Or is this a time to allow the new in our life to break through, displacing what was, and renewing our life in a way we could never have anticipated? Are we to let go or to take firmer hold?

**Meeting and Separation** The experience of meeting and separation within our relationship with God can be deeply unsettling, but a gift to us all the same. Restlessness and dissatisfaction may prove more positive than negative, directing us towards where our life lies in God.

**In the Wilderness** Those who wander in a wilderness of uncertainty need reassurance that this experience, despite appearances, is meaningful and formative. The journey towards recovery of lost meaning, or the resolution of a question, or finding that place where life is fruitful and we feel we belong, is long and testing. Change and growth take place by process. Pilgrims through a barren land need support in recognising and then remembering the pillar of fire moments when the purpose of the journey and the presence of the guide became clear.

**Being set free from slave-drivers** Such work of discernment is aided by the insights of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Those who accompany others help those they guide to pay attention to their feelings, desires and patterns of behaviour – comfortable and uncomfortable. They seek to be a balance at equilibrium, neither pushing the person this way or that. As directors they know the only direction that matters is the direction proposed by the Spirit of God; their words only serve to enable the ones they guide to listen and to respond.

### **Growing in faith, hope and love**

Faith proposes that despite all appearances there is one alongside us in whom we can trust. Hope affirms that this unpromising place is where God continues to create being and goodness. Love is the willingness to go on offering what one has and is, and the refusal to allow ourselves to become self-absorbed, aggressive and fearful in the face of evil. What confuses us is that we assume faith, hope and love to be feelings we enjoy when, first and foremost, they are choices we make and ways we align our lives. They are sails we set for the wind of the Spirit to fill, for they have no lasting life except for this gift. When we are brought low by difficulty and pain our natural optimism and strength can ebb away; we do not feel trusting, hopeful or loving. Then we need a guide to encourage us to act what we do not feel, unfurling the sails once more, trusting in the power of the wind to move us across the deep, wide sea.

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