



Christmas Day, Year A – December 25, 2010

John 1.1-14

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

7 hours, 53 minutes, and 53 seconds: that is how many hours' sunlight the people of Calgary enjoyed on this year's winter solstice, December 21. Or perhaps I should put it the other way: the people of Calgary were *without* sun on that day for 17 hours, 6 minutes, and 7 seconds.

Except, this rather overpaints the picture, doesn't it? Despite all our whining about short days and long nights, we don't really know what "deep, thick, darkness" is. From the twinkling of Christmas lights to the headlamps on our cars, from our Indiglo™ wristwatches to our flat screen TVs, we are *saturated* with light. Some have even described the midnight glow that hangs over our cities as "light pollution."

My point is only this: the children of Edison are singularly ill-equipped to appreciate how fearsome and oppressive darkness was to our forebears. Imagine, if you will, a massive power failure every single day. We do have evidence of what happens in such black outs. I've actually seen it! First there is a deafening silence as your world powers down. And then, Chaos! The collapse of a transit system—street cars simply abandoned on major thoroughfares (which means nothing else moves, either); the closure of the stock exchange; there is no access to money or food if you don't have cash, because every bank machine and ATM terminal in the city is "down." There is looting. Licentiousness. And not a man, woman or child, who seems to know how to cope without a functioning smart phone, kitchen appliance, or computer.

For our forebears, deep, thick, darkness was a fact of daily life. They may have coped with it better than we do, but it was still their enemy, paralyzing their ability to act, and pregnant with the potential for destruction.

It is important for us to grasp this as we try to hear with new ears the words of John:

What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. – John 1.3-5,9

You can see how John could scarcely have chosen a more powerful metaphor for the coming of God among us in Christ. It is also a rich metaphor, and John will milk it well.

After all, think of all the ways we use the idea of "light."

For example, at its most basic, light is what allows us to see, it is what keeps us from wandering off the path, or from running into "ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night" (to quote the old Cornish prayer). In other words, John is telling us that Jesus is come to show us the way forward. To be, as the psalmist says, "a lamp to our feet and light to our path" (Psalm 119.105). I cannot be the only one who spends a good portion of every single day trying to decipher the clearest route from here to there, that is, from problem to solution. And John says, Jesus Christ is the Light of the world.

Of course, we don't always welcome the light, do we? For darkness, like wallpaper, covers a multitude of sins. A bright light is the visual version of a whistle blower: it has the power to expose flaws, and secrets, and a general shabbiness which would not otherwise command our attention. For John, this is an important component of the work of Jesus. In Chapter 3, Jesus will say, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (3.19). We're not sure we want the kind of honesty a bright light forces upon us. After all, the propensity to self-deception is pretty well hardwired into our fallen human condition. We may overestimate our abilities, or underestimate our abilities. We can find any number of reasons to lay the blame for our situation at the feet of someone (anyone!) or something (anything!) else. And along comes Jesus shining the light of truth on our actions, our words, our motives. It may be humbling, even humiliating to see ourselves as we truly are, but this, my friends, is the essential first step to healing. John says, Jesus Christ is the Light of the world.

Or again, we think of light as that which "clarifies" our mental state. If we are "in the dark" about something, or "benighted," it means that we are clueless, that we're not firing on all four cylinders (let alone 6!). It means that we are missing essential information for living life fully and well. And so we speak of "enlightenment." Jesus is come to enlighten our understanding, to teach us a new and indispensable way to interpret "stuff." Think about it. Wouldn't it be nice, just for once, not to be stuck in the same old (benighted) way of viewing our problems, our relatives, our co-workers, our finances, ourselves? John says, Jesus Christ is the Light of the world.

It does sound good, doesn't it? Even the dreaded idea of exposure, in our bravest moments, promises a new freedom from the labour of pretence. So, where do we "get" this light? How do we "access" it?

The answer to this question is the whole point of Christmas, the whole point of Incarnation. Because here is the thing. Light isn't a commodity to be "accessed." It isn't a consumable to be "got." It can't be bought or traded or trapped. My friends, it cannot even be seen. You do not see light. Rather – and this is the point – you see *by* light.

Jesus is not like some spiritual flashlight we take up whenever we think we need a little help. On the contrary, God had an infinitely wiser plan, for God has placed his light, placed his Christ *within* us, constantly to shine in our hearts, constantly to free us from dark thoughts, to call to attention our shabby bits, and to teach us the way forward. In a very real sense, then, we are the flashlight. The Light of the world resides within us.

And all that remains to us is to centre down, to go deep within as only prayer will take us, find the switch, and turn it on.