

# J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and  
Who is to come! ✎ Amen.

At the very beginning of Saint John's Gospel we read:

*"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness  
did not overcome it."*

*-- John 1:5*

And just two chapters later, after Jesus had reclaimed the Temple as His Father's House in a manner punishable by death, just a little later in John's Gospel, in which the most important actions and conversations frame the whole story of Jesus, at the beginning and at the end, as part of His explanation of what God is doing to a genuine seeker, the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus references that Light that is in Him, that Light that He Himself is in today's Gospel:

*“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.”*

*-- John 3:19*

**S**omeone has left the light on wherever there

is darkness in this world, and that light still shines brightly.

In an otherwise dark prison cell in Kabul, Afghanistan, amid a darkness we cannot begin to imagine, someone has left a light on. In that cell a member of our family, a brother of yours and mine in Christ Jesus through water and the Holy Spirit waits. He waits as Saint Paul the Apostle waited under house arrest, never knowing when his trial would be, swept up finally in Emperor Nero's bloody purge of Jews and Christians.

He waits as Saint Perpetua waited with her former maidservant, now her sister in Christ, as she waited just long enough to give birth to her first and only child, as she waited before being led into the arena to be ripped to pieces as an

offering to the gods of Rome. He waits as Saint Gregory the Illuminator waited for thirteen years at the bottom of a foul Armenian well full of snakes and scorpions and corpses, waited there and survived thanks to the kindness of a widow who threw him a fresh-baked loaf of bread every day, waited there, praying and singing God's praise at the top of his lungs, until the king who threw him into that place had him released and asked to be baptized.

He waits as Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer waited in an improvised Nazi prison, as he waited with other prisoners specially chosen for execution, no matter what, by the great tyrant they had all opposed, though not all for the same reasons. He waits as Christians of this century and the last have waited, doggedly determined in their millions to believe that God is love in the face of states and ideologies that found them inconvenient.

He waits as they all did, and he knows why he waits. His name is Abdul Rahman, and, his trial now over, he waits simply to hear the sentence of death read to him in the name of a vengeful deity to which he has said goodbye forever, in the name of a counterfeit democracy our own country helped to set up and establish with no regard whatever for the United Nations or its Universal Declaration on Human Rights. His crime is that of all the others before him, turning toward the light of God's love in Jesus Christ rather than toward the darkness most others love to serve. His crime is choosing the freedom to stand before God a free man, already free no matter what sentence is read, while those who condemn him choose the slavery of their minds and wills that has made them slaves for centuries, even for centuries before their false prophet gave them a religious reason for being slaves.

The Light of Christ shines in the darkness of whatever hole they have put him in. Does it shine in *our* darkness, in *your* darkness? We have the Scripture's assurance that it does. John the Evangelist does not confess that 'the Light shines in *some* darkness, but not in *every* darkness.' No. The Gospel teaches clearly that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." *For whom* does the Light of God's love in Jesus Christ shine? For *everyone!* "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

*In whom* does the Light of Christ shine? *Not* in everyone, sadly. "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." We see that judgment wherever people are still blind, frozen in their *pre-judgments* about others, judgments made without knowledge and

without wisdom, *prejudice* that writes off all members of a particular group, or those we group into that group we fear, despise or pity. Racism, ethnic and religious bigotry are among the most cold-blooded and premeditated of sins, and those who live in bondage to them are no more likely to be convinced of their folly by the non-conformist Jew and social revolutionary from Nazareth than by the human faces of those they have wronged throughout the course of a lifetime and *beyond* by passing the venom of their hatred on to the rising generation. “. . . . and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

*In whom* does the Light of God's love shine? *Neither in those determined not to let it shine*, nor in their communities. We need not travel to wild Afghanistan to find those opposed to Church bells or steeples and determined to keep them zoned out of their neighborhoods, those opposed to the study of the Bible and the Christian tradition in its

many-faceted forms even when it is taught and studied alongside the other great faith and wisdom traditions of the human family. And our in-grained political tradition causes us to think of the Church as by definition a private affair and as therefore unimportant, though from the Day of Pentecost on the Church has been the most public of human communities.

One of the most serious and effective oppositions to the Light of Christ and the things of faith has so firmly entrenched itself in our lives that we hardly notice the blind spot or see it for what it is. What totalitarian governments of every description have tried and failed to accomplish, the frustration of the education and spiritual formation of Christian children and youth, has been accomplished with *stunning* success through the American mania for 'free' time and athletic competition— *as though our youth did not need to know their faith and what it demands of them, as though*

*they were not growing up in a world that will be marked for as long in the future as we can imagine by the hostile, warlike commitment of a religion born in hatred of both Jews and Christians.* The pastor, director of Christian education, youth minister or choir director who tries to organize a Confirmation class or youth choir rehearsal on any day and time but the hour before or after worship will encounter a wall of opposition as strong as it ever was in the days of Hitler Youth or the Young Pioneers. We let our young people stumble forward into life with so little light to illumine their path it is small wonder that, with their first encounter with real, inner darkness, many do not know where to turn for the Light that could save them from despair.

The Mullahs have nothing to fear from a Christian West about to launch a great Crusade against Islam, for there very nearly *is* no 'Christian West.' We are collectively fresh

out of faith, a formerly Christian culture that has today a clearer idea of what Muslims believe and practice than what the Church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses. We must surely look to them like a ridiculous people of darkness indeed, worshipping sports or sensuality or luxury, *very often mocking our own sacred heritage* in music or art or education, worshipping anything *but* the Light that shines in the darkness of *anyone* who believes in Him, anyone like Abdul Rahman.

But what if that all changed? It *is* changing. It *could* change throughout the Muslim world in a change so rapid I doubt we are ready for it. The Church, the Body of Christ *is* strong and growing, stronger than ever, more numerous than ever, but not in the places from which our ancestors came, and not also in the places they landed. On the First Sunday of Advent, we met that future Church, in the person of the Reverend Melkizedek Mbilinyi, a pastor of our partner

diocese in Tanzania, East Africa. On that great Continent, the cradle of humanity, the Gospel met fierce and determined opposition, and not just because it came with colonial powers. The Light of Christ meant and means the death of the gods of fear and domination and bondage. Wave after wave of missionaries came and died the martyr's death or perished from sickness at their posts. Generations of indigenous believers were made to suffer for their faith as well, the blood of the Cross flowing in rivers, well into the last Century. Then, finally, here and there, this king and that chieftain was ashamed, felt shame before a God he had never called by name before for trying to cover up such a great Light with feeble human darkness. The killing stopped. The Church flourished. Whole peoples confessed their faith and were baptized into the Name of God's love for the whole world. Today their missionaries come to proclaim the Gospel to *us*, thanks be to God!

Why the feverish attempts in the Muslim world to suppress the belief and teaching of Christianity, even now in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, even in newly established so-called 'democracies' like Afghanistan? It can only be that those rulers of darkness sense their people's yearning for *light*, that they sense, rightly, that their reign of terror will be at an end as soon as the message of the Prince of Peace is no longer silenced. *Shame* on them! May they know shame in measure to the misery they have meted out, and may *they* turn and repent! May they this very day be ashamed in the presence of a better man than they, a man of *holy* faith who is determined to let the Light of Christ shine in the darkness of his life and his nation, and may they let that Light shine on all who will not turn away from it! If they will not, then may the Holy Spirit comfort him and the Holy Angels minister to him without ceasing.

Someone has left the light on in our world, no matter how frightening and how dark a place it may seem, and no hand, however strong, however determined, will ever be able to turn it off! ✍ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. ✍ Amen.

