

Bromley Parish church
January 6th 2019

EPIPHANY
Isaiah 60

Christmas this year seems to have been a time when many of us have been managing very mixed feelings.

We rejoice that there's a brand new Christmas baby, Isabelle, in the vicarage – born amazingly on Christmas morning. We anticipate, with expectancy, the ministry that our new vicar, James, will exercise here in our church.

But we also reflect with sadness over the recent deaths of some longstanding, loved members of this church, and other friends and relatives of ours – and other people who, right now, are gravely ill.

Rejoicing and grieving at the same time is challenging and confusing. Sometimes, we're not sure where we are. Perhaps, on one hand, we find ourselves generously supporting those in need through the night shelter, JustB and appeals to help refugees and flood victims.

On the other hand, we may find we lose patience with one another, say things better left unsaid, and close ranks - so that someone who doesn't feel securely "one of us" can't quite squeeze in, feels left out, and leaves the church.

As a church community, in recent months, we've been bereaved. In unguarded moments this sneaks out. We behave as the books say bereaved people do.

At first, we may make out that everything's all right, they're with God, we gloss over our loss. Then we find ourselves unusually short-tempered, little things become mountainous. Confusing since we rarely connect it with our great losses... they've really gone, and things won't be the same without them. We probably haven't noticed our anger at

our loss. It seeps out in our dealings with others: "She didn't do that properly – again!" or "He never remembers and always leaves it to me!" and so on. Unless we realise that, as a church, we've recently faced significant losses, we may well find ourselves in trouble in our relationships with one another.

Our Old Testament passage from Isaiah 60 is also full of such swirling difficult emotions. The chapters coming immediately before chapter 60 are full of the peoples' depression and total misery. And then, quite suddenly, Chapter 60 bursts out with total opposites. Out of the deepest of darkness burning beams of light blazes out.

Right now, if you're like me, you'll be struggling to contain profound opposites in your minds - our grief at our recent bereavements, and our joy at the birth of the Christmas vicarage baby. In today's reading, Isaiah writes of similar total opposites that seem too difficult to fully grasp.

Take the ways in which we perceive and experience God within our most private, inner selves. A man nicknamed Pseudo-Dionysius articulated this as long ago as the 5th century

He taught that God is a "*dazzling darkness*." Our minds go into reverse gear at such an idea. How can God simultaneously be both deepest darkness and the most dazzling light. Nonsense!

God is two complete opposite – both dazzling light and total darkness. We think they're incompatible – but in God they're not.

Pseudo-Dionysius pointed out that we try to understand God in two totally distinct ways.

One line of reasoning states that since we lack the capacity of understanding God, we're incapable of stating precisely who or what God is. So, we speak about what God is *not*: "God is neither, this nor that". We define God in negatives.

The other line of reasoning defines God in positives - God is love, beauty, wonder, life, light and so on. It isn't a case of half-full and half-empty because God is full to the brim.

Are we getting lost? Perhaps poetry will help us. The poet begins by referring to the atheist Maxim Gorky in the first line:

Like Gorky, I sometimes follow my doubts
outside and question the metal sky,
longing to have the fight settled, thinking
I can't go on like this, and finally I say

All right, it is improbable, all right there
is no God. And then as if I'm focussing
a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up.
It's the attention, maybe, to what isn't
there that makes the notion flare like
a forest fire until I have to spend the afternoon
dragging a hose to put it out.

....

Oh, we have so many words to think with.
Say God's not a fire, say anything, say God's
a phone, maybe. You didn't order a phone
but there it is. It rings. You don't know who it could be.

You don't want to talk, so you pull out
the plug. It rings. You smash it with a hammer
till it bleeds springs and coils and clobbered up metal
bits. It rings again. You pick it up

and a voice you love whispers "hallo".¹

Occasionally, John and I went to services in St Marylebone church. One of the preachers there puts what I'm trying to say so clearly that I'm going to leave you with his words.

"We can't adequately describe God in negative or positive terms – our language can't properly describe God. Our capacity to understand fails when we think of the dazzling brilliance and apparent clarity yet mystery of God.

"It's by allowing ourselves to be dazzled, dazed, by accepting that we don't know, that our hearts and minds can then be open to a truth which is real, rather than something we construct or manipulate ourselves, to make it we would like it to be.

"Where do we go from here? Instead of trying to talk about God, we need to *stop* and, instead, allow ourselves to *encounter* God. Not simply looking for God, but *letting* God come to us.

"That's what Christmas teaches us. That's what the Epiphany was. It wasn't simply people visiting God in Jesus. It was people who were *faithful* and *open* to change, *not forcing* but *letting* God's story *unfold* in their lives in a new way. Letting God guide them, by a star, by a child, by a path as yet untrodden, and uncertain, yet fully trusting God to show them the way - even when the next step was unknown. A dazzling darkness!

"As Isaiah says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you."² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you...⁵ ... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy;

"That is an Epiphany – gazing at the dazzling darkness, as fellow pilgrims in our church, and instead of changing what you *think* God is, being *prepared to change* how you think, then God will show you everything you'll ever need to know."

¹ Jeanne Murray Walker (American contemporary) p. 95 *Light upon Light*, Sarah Arthur, Paraclete Press