Light in the Darkness

When I was a boy I was scared of the dark. Especially if I had to go upstairs to my bedroom, and it was dark. Now, I'm sure that you're all much braver than me, but I was afraid that under my bed there might be a monster lurking, or in my cupboard there might be another one hiding.

But now, I'm an adult, I'm not so afraid of the dark. But I still like the fact that at Christmas all the lights go on. And the shops are decorated with lights, and neighbours outdo one another with how many lights they can cover their houses with - and you can have giant blow-up Santas, and reindeer and polar bears filled with light.

It's as if Christmas has become a secular festival of light, brightening up dark December.

But as the lights get turned on at Christmas, they're a yearly reminder of what Christmas is really about.

You see, whilst I don't believe in monsters anymore, the world is still a dark place. In fact, the Bible begins by telling us that into the darkness and emptiness of the universe God spoke and said, "let there be light' and there was light. But it also tells us that it wasn't long before mankind was trying to put out the light. And that through our selfishness and self-centredness, the world has become a pretty dark place.

And everyone's got a different idea as to how to bring back the light - how to make the world a better place. Religions tell you that you have to become a better person, a much better you, in fact, you've got to become more like God, more full of light, if you're to have any hope of entering or shining God's light in the world. Or, our modern cultures tell us that you've already got the light inside you, you've just got to be true to yourself and we can fix this together - that our inner goodness can defeat the darkness. Whilst atheism tells us - well, whatever you do, at some point you, and the universe, like a candle, are going to be snuffed out, so whatever you do doesn't really have any ultimate meaning. So just accept it and be happy.

But Christianity says something very different. It says that we're like people who have lost our way on a dark night. And we're trying to find the path, but we can't, but we think we can, so we stumble and grope about in the dark. But it also tells us that the way we try and solve the problem - by trying to find our own way in life, and make our own light - just compounds the problem, because at the heart of our darkness is this desire to live life apart from God - to turn our back on God's light.

And it's that turning in on ourselves, that looking to our own resources, our own solutions, that deepens our darkness.

So Christianity tells us that what we *really* need is a light from outside of us to show us the way. And the message of Christmas is that that light has dawned.

And writing hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, the prophet Isaiah wrote that once again God would break into the darkness and emptiness of our world: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone…. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.'

Now, when I was a doctor, I got to attend lots of births. And that moment when another life enters the world is an incredible moment. But the message of Christmas is that when Jesus was born, something much more than just another *life* entered the world. It was a life, St. John writes, that's 'the light of men'.

You remember how in the Lord of the Rings, Galadriel hands Frodo a crystal that glows with the light of Earendil the elves' favourite star, and she says to him, "May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." And every year Christmas reminds us that the Lord Jesus is that light. The Light who lightens our darkness where all other lights, all our own efforts to turn back the darkness of the world, and of our hearts, fail. 'The light', that St John says, 'shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

It's why when the angels announce his birth to the shepherds the glory of the Lord shines around them. It's why when the magi come to worship him, a star lighting up the night sky guides them. It's why in O Holy Night, we sang, 'a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices; for yonder breaks a new and glorious dawn.'

But there's a danger here. You see, the great teachers of other religions were just that, great teachers, good examples, shining lights, encouraging us to be like them. But Christmas reminds us that Jesus didn't come to demand we become like him. Instead, in the dark of the stable God became like us, to be not our example, but our saviour. As St John says, 'we have seen his glory' - his light - 'full of grace and truth.' The truth that tells it to us straight about the deep darkness of our hearts and our world, but the grace that enters that darkness. And at the cross, he fully identified with us, and was enveloped by the spiritual darkness that was ours to bear, so that we might enter his light.

But the physically dark night of his birth, and the spiritual darkness of his death, weren't the end of the story. Instead, at dawn, at the breaking of the third day, as the sun rose, he rose.

And so Jesus was born to do more than show us the way. As we sang in Hark the Herald Angels Sing: 'Hail! the heaven-born Prince of peace! Hail! the Son of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die: Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.'

That's the light that shines in the darkness. That's the Christmas message. That Christ has come to call us out of darkness. That our dark hearts can be changed, and remade, renewed, reborn. That he can be our light - at Christmas sure, but better still in every moment of every day of every year as we put our trust in him, rather than in ourselves.