



TREASURES OF DARKNESS

REFLECTION WEEK 3 - SHADOW

BY PROF CHRIS COOK

◆ About this reflection

This reflection explores the theme of shadow and the practice of bringing what we carry within us before God.

Please engage at your own pace and care for yourself as you read. Where possible, this is best explored prayerfully and in community.

◆ Scripture

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

John 3:1-8 (NRSVA)

◆ Reflection

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

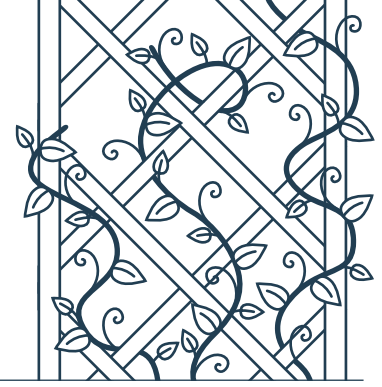
Scripture takes us on a journey from darkness into light, from night into day. From the command of God in Genesis, "Let there be light!" (Gen 1:3), through to the new Jerusalem in Revelation, in which there will be no more night, because "the Lord God will be [its] light" (Rev 22:5), light generally has good connotations, and darkness evil. Generally... but not always.

St Paul, for example, talks of Satan disguising himself as an "angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). Things that initially seem full of light, good and attractive, can turn out to be the opposite. Conversely, in Exodus (20:21), we read that, at the foot of Mount Sinai, "Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was". In some ways, God will always be a "thick darkness" to human beings who struggle to take in the awesome power and holiness of a God who is far



TREASURES OF DARKNESS

REFLECTION WEEK 3: SHADOW



beyond human comprehension.

Reflecting on this, in an attempt to express the paradox, Gregory of Nyssa spoke of the “luminous darkness” that is the Divine mystery. In a similar vein, St John of the Cross suggested that faith is a “dark night”, because, paradoxically, it sheds a blindingly bright light upon the soul. In contrast to this dazzling light, natural ways of knowing seem like darkness. So – for John of the Cross – faith is a kind of night.

What about our reading from John’s Gospel? In what kind of night does Nicodemus come to Jesus?

In the prologue to John’s Gospel, we learn that Jesus is the true light that came into the world (1:9). “The light shines in the darkness”, John says, “and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). As this Gospel unfolds, night is an image that John employs in a variety of ways, but they are generally not good. The works of God the Father are undertaken in daytime and at night “no one can work” (9:4). “[T]hose who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them” (11:10). Night is when Judas goes out to betray Jesus (13:30). At night, Peter and the disciples catch no fish (21:3).

So – when Nicodemus comes to Jesus “at night”, what does this tell us? Is Nicodemus an evil man who, as one of those whom Jesus refers to later in Chapter 3, “love darkness rather than light” (3:19)? Or, in coming to Jesus, is he one of “those who do what is true”, coming to Jesus (the light), “so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (3:21)? Just on the basis of verse 2, we’d be hard pressed to know. We are left to make up our own minds as the story unfolds but significantly, later in the Gospel, Nicodemus plays a positive part in the burial of Jesus.

Like Nicodemus, most of us are more complicated than a binary model of light and darkness, day and night, might suggest. We come to Jesus, if we do so sincerely, because we recognise the darkness within us that is in need of his light. There is a part of us which, if we are honest, does love darkness. Because we are ashamed of it, perhaps especially if we are Christians, we keep it hidden and out of sight.

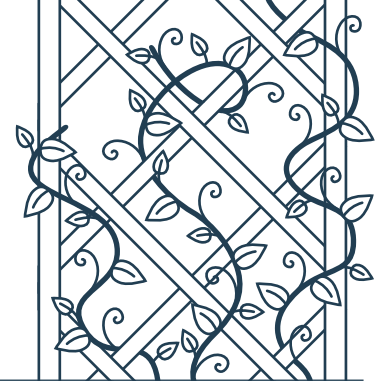
This darker part of the human psyche is what the psychiatrist Carl Jung referred to as the “shadow” side of the self. Because we keep it hidden and do not like to look at it, it is only partly accessible to conscious awareness. An important task of human development, according to Jung, is our ability to come to terms with this darker side of who we are, to acknowledge it, and to integrate it into consciousness. Once we have the courage to do this, it often turns out not to be as bad or as frightening as we feared. Even when we don’t like what we see, it is better to be honest about it – to bring it into the light – than to keep it hidden.

This is not just a psychological task although, clearly, we cannot escape the emotional and thinking components of it. It is primarily a spiritual process, as Jesus explains to Nicodemus, a kind of rebirth. The birth of faith within us is a mystery and, in this sense, an encounter with darkness. However, darkness is not the only image that can be used to describe it.



TREASURES OF DARKNESS

REFLECTION WEEK 3: SHADOW



In verse 8 of our reading, to reemphasise the importance of faith as concerned with what we cannot see or understand, Jesus talks about the spiritual transformation into which we are invited as like a wind that blows through our lives. Even though we hear it, and see its effects, we cannot see the wind itself. We do not know where it comes from, nor where it is going to.

This process of dealing with the shadow side of ourselves is thus more about what we do not know than about what we believe and understand. Jesus does take Nicodemus to task about what he believes and understands – or, rather, what he does not believe and does not understand – at some length. However, the process to which Nicodemus is invited to submit himself, and into which we are similarly invited, is primarily relational. It is about whether we love the light of Jesus more than the darkness of this world. It is about whether or not we love Jesus enough, and trust him enough, that we will have the courage to come to him to have the darkness within us exposed.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night”, we are thus being told a lot more than simply the time of day at which his conversation with Jesus took place. In coming to Jesus and acknowledging the presence of God at work in Jesus, he is opening up a life changing dialogue. He is exposing himself to the true light. He is inviting a process of transformation which he does not fully understand, and the end of which he cannot see, but which he acknowledges, at some level, is deeply important. He is expressing an inner desire, a love for light more than darkness.

Darkness is thus a shadow within us; something that needs to be exposed to the light of Christ. However, we also find darkness all around us. This might seem more evident than ever this Lent, as we look at a world torn apart by trauma, violence and lies. All of our lives, at some time or another, are darkened by suffering: bereavement, illness, broken relationships, loss of a job, abuse or any one of innumerable other dark things that happen to us for reasons which – like Job – we struggle to understand. These nighttime experiences can be challenging. We might react to them, in faith – or with loss of faith. Sometimes they might be identifiable as what John of the Cross would have called a dark night of the soul, although a dark night – as John understands it – has as much to do with the night within us as it does with the night around us.

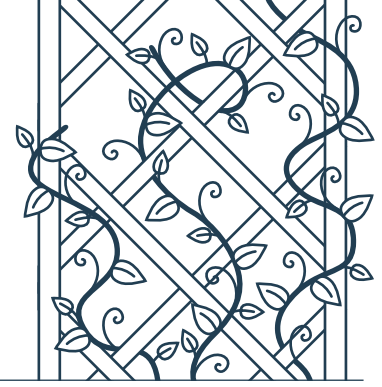
In his two books, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*, John of the Cross explores dark night experiences in depth. He is very alert to the ways in which our subjective experiences and feelings mislead us. When God feels furthest away, he may in fact be closest at hand. Thus, in Mark’s Gospel, when Jesus has been perfectly faithful to his Father’s will, he cries from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

John of the Cross did not speak lightly of such things. He wrote out of bitter experience of the most awful treatment in prison, being subjected to mental and physical torture by those who were supposedly his Christian brothers. Amidst all of this he was able to identify God’s presence and guidance. “O guiding night! O night more lovely than the dawn!” he wrote in the *Dark Night*, not out of cosy feelings of a comforting religious experience, but out of a depth of faith in God’s presence amidst awful darkness.



TREASURES OF DARKNESS

REFLECTION WEEK 3: SHADOW



The dark night metaphor, for John of the Cross, arose in part because his dramatic escape from prison took place – literally – at night. More importantly, for John, faith is darkness. It is not about what we see, but rather about the faith and hope and love that we find exactly when we cannot see. One modern author describes it as like waiting for a train on a deserted station with no indicator board, never knowing if or when God will turn up. Other dark night experiences are stormier than this image might suggest. Like the disciples in the boat on Galilee, it can feel as though Jesus is there – but asleep. He calls us to have faith that he can still the storm even when it looks as though he is going to do nothing at all about it.

So, this Lent, John the evangelist and John of the Cross invite us to take a journey into metaphorical darkness. They invite us to open up to the light of Christ the things within us that we keep hidden or are ashamed to share with others. They invite us to find God amidst the darkness that surrounds us, and to expose the darkness within us to the light of his Son. We are challenged to be honest with ourselves and with God about the things that we most fear or are most ashamed of.

It can be hard to find our way in darkness, and so we need some kind of a compass or a wise guide. Perhaps we need to talk with a spiritual director, or priest or close friend. Perhaps we need to establish a rule of life, as St Benedict did in the rule that bears his name. Or perhaps we need to go on retreat and engage in spiritual exercises, such as the Ignatian exercises. St Ignatius had some useful ideas about how to discern light and darkness (or – as he might say – consolation and desolation) for what they truly are. In all of these ways, we can seek wisdom and ask Jesus to guide us through the darkness.

Wisdom invites us prayerfully to look beyond and behind appearances. She prompts us to question the darkness that masquerades as light, and to find the light of Christ amidst the deepest darkness. She asks us if we have the courage to explore parts of ourselves that we are not proud of and hardly dare admit to. She invites us to step out into the darkness of unknowing and to expose ourselves to the wind of the Holy Spirit, who may take us we know not where.

Both Johns – the evangelist and the Carmelite Friar – invite us into a transforming relationship with the God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son as light into darkness, so that we might know life in all its fullness.

© CCHC, 25 February 2026