

Tarrying in the Darkness

St Brandon's

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

3 March 2024

Our gospel reading this morning from John feels a little out of place. The other three gospels have the cleansing of the Temple following on from Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. John, however, puts it very early in his gospel (Chapter 2), and so separates it from his account of Palm Sunday (Chapter 12). Why? A good question that I'm not going to try to answer this morning! We'll leave the cleansing of the Temple until after Palm Sunday, and look at it on the Tuesday of Holy Week.

But, as I'm sure you'd agree, our other reading this morning from 1 Corinthians is so straightforward as to need almost no comment. You'd be ahead of me all the way if I tried to expound it!

So, having told you what I'm not going to do this morning (though I will refer briefly to the NT reading), what am I going to do? Well, I've been reading the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book for 2024 entitled *Tarry Awhile. Wisdom from Black spirituality for people of faith* by Selina Stone,¹ and I want to explore with you two of the things she grapples with in that book: Tarrying, from the title; and Darkness from the first chapter. That may seem a bit of an odd thing to do, so let me start by giving a bit of context.

Selina Stone is a young Black theologian who authored a recent report for the CofE about the wellbeing of global majority heritage clergy in the Church – people who we would probably more naturally refer to as ethnic minority clergy, but worth noting the change of emphasis 'global majority heritage' clergy brings.² She is herself an African Caribbean woman born in Birmingham, the granddaughter of four formidable Jamaicans who arrived in this country in 1963. She's also known a bit to us because she is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Theological Education at Durham University with Common Awards. And Mike (Higton) is responsible for Common Awards, and so knows her and gets an honourable mention in the acknowledgements. I've also met Selina, online at least, because she is a Patron of a national charity that I chair. So, there were many good reasons for me to read the book.

The title *Tarry Awhile* is taken from the King James' version of Jesus's words to His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26: 38). But tarrying is also a particular spiritual practice of many Black and particularly Pentecostal churches – "a collective time of waiting on God which can go on for hours",³ as Selina puts it.

So, what about Darkness, the title of her first chapter?⁴ Darkness is usually seen negatively and in contrast to light. St John's gospel, in particular, plays on that contrast. And we talk about dark

¹ Selina Stone, *Tarry Awhile. Wisdom from Black spirituality for people of faith*, SPCK, 2023.

² See [focussed-study-3-gmh-clergy-wellbeing.pdf \(churchofengland.org\)](#), 2022.

³ *Tarry Awhile*, p.4.

⁴ The following is taken largely from *Tarry Awhile*, pp.6-24.

times and dark thoughts. Darkness is also used as a metaphor for separation from God, and Christians, by contrast, as the light of the world.

But there are dangers in this usage. One of these dangers is racial. Black people are dark-skinned, and it is too easy to then associate this with spiritual darkness, and by contrast to assume that people who are 'light and white' are therefore closer to goodness and godliness. Africa was known as the 'dark continent' – a condescending title that seemed to lead to their need for white Europeans to 'enlighten' them, with all the horrors that followed in colonisation.

But darkness can be good. Think of plant life and all that goes on in the dark, under the surface. Think of the childhood experiment of growing cress in the dark. Think of the foetus, developing from a single cell to a full-formed child in the womb, in the darkness. Darkness can be full of potential, expectation, anticipation.

So to assume that God is absent from 'dark' places is, therefore, a grave error. Darkness and God are not incompatible. For example, God made His covenant with Abram in the darkness: "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him". But it was in that darkness that the Lord spoke to Abram and made His covenant with him (Gen. 15: 12-15).

Similarly, Jacob wrestled with God throughout the night, in the dark, and was blessed by Him only as the day was breaking (Gen. 32: 22-31). The fleeing Israelites were protected from the advancing Egyptians when the pillar of cloud and darkness moved between the two armies (Ex. 14: 19-20). And God spoke the ten commandments to the whole assembly of Israel "at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud and the thick darkness" (Deuteronomy 5: 22). God called Samuel in the night, in the dark, when as a boy he was with Eli in the Temple (1 Samuel 3: 4ff.). And an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, in the night, in the dark, telling him to take Mary as his wife, and in another dream later to tell him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt (Matt. 1:20; 2:13).

So God can and does work in and through darkness. Darkness can, therefore, be full of potential, expectation, anticipation.

And we find something similar going on when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest. It was night and dark, so that Jesus was waiting on God, praying to God in the darkness. He was distressed, overwhelmed with sorrow, full of anxiety. The physical darkness all around Him was consistent with the darkness of confusion, difficulty and an inability to see the way forward. But, the darkness, though painful, was also full of God's sustaining grace.

As Jesus tarried with God in the darkness, he gained victory over every resistance to following through with the path He had been led along: "Not my will but yours be done" (Matt. 26: 39). And it was in the darkness that He in turn spoke to His disciples: "Tarry ye here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26: 38).

And the result of His obedience, of course, was that Jesus went to the cross, another place of darkness, an accursed place. And yet, of course, also a blessed place, a place from which good emerged. No wonder St Paul called the cross foolishness and a stumbling block. How could good come from the defeat and death of Jesus, the defeat and death of God? And yet, out of the darkness, the most amazing good comes.

Darkness may be unpleasant, though as we've seen that's not always the case. It may be a place of confusion and difficulty. Darkness may for us be an inability to see where we are, and where we should be going. Darkness may be tough. But darkness is also a fact and a feature of our lives. And to assume that God is absent from it, and that no good can come from it is clearly a mistake. Darkness can be full of potential, expectation, anticipation.

And the spiritual practice that we need in that kind of darkness is to tarry, to stay there in the darkness. Tarrying is something we have to choose to do, rather than something that is forced upon us. We might be forced to wait, but we have to choose to tarry. Tarrying represents a posture of the heart, our hearts being turned towards God while we are in a time of waiting.

Tarrying is a time to wait *with* God, and a time to wait *on* God. In waiting *with* God, we set aside time to meet with the one who is the source of our life. It is to pause and sit with the one who has made us and sustains us. In waiting *on* God, we wait for God to answer, to explain, to move us on. In this, "we expect that this time will not be in vain, but that we will leave having received something from the one who has all things to give".⁵

So, let us hear Jesus's words to His disciples: "Tarry ye here, and watch with me". Let us tarry awhile in this season of Lent, tarrying with Jesus through His passion and death. But also, when we are in tough periods of darkness in our lives, dark places, let us tarry awhile with God and on God. For out of the darkness may come blessings that we could receive in no other way.

Amen

⁵ *Tarry Awhile*, p.21,