



From: The Dean
The Very Revd Nicholas Henshall

8 August 2020

Dear friends and colleagues across the Cathedral Community,

WAITING FOR THE DAWN

As a student, my youngest daughter, Lucy, spent 6 months living on the island of Svalbard way up in the Arctic Circle. 2,000 people and 3,00 polar bears. We talked often and as winter arrived she described the subtle changes. The days getting shorter and shorter; the week when the sun no longer rose above the horizon; and finally, the dense darkness of polar night. Everything shifted. The entire pattern of the day changed gear for the whole town and the university, beginning at 10.30 am and finishing at 2.30 am, as if by common unspoken agreement. Life became completely different. For a newcomer to the island it was seriously disconcerting, gradually finding your place again as the rhythms changed and the details of daily life had to be renegotiated.

It is a crude parallel, but as our present experience continues to develop and change; as the rules and the guidance alter; as we grapple with the challenges of negotiating our way to a new future, I find Lucy's experience of polar night useful. She had to develop a new muscle – enough "head space" – to accommodate changes that reached into every part of daily life.

We are having an extraordinary collective experience. Whether we find this difficult or easy – and I think for most of us it is both – this is at the very least disconcerting; our patterns and rhythms so deeply disrupted. In my own life I am very aware that I have developed new habits, both bad and good. At the trivial end of "bad" is a slight addiction to low fat cheese slices. At the serious end of "good" is a deepening experience of silence and reflective stillness.

But whatever our personal experiences, the challenge for all of us is that there is no time scale. Polar night in the Arctic Circle is always going to come to an end in the new year and I remember Lucy's excitement when they had the first sun rise in many months. Our challenge inevitably is that we don't know when dawn will come. And even when the sun does rise, we don't know what things will look like; how much will stay the same and how much will have changed beyond recognition; what we will have lost, and what will have been renewed.

The Gospel reading for tomorrow speaks directly to our situation as people of faith. It is Matthew 14.22-33. Jesus has just fed thousands of people and goes off into the hills for a night of prayer. He has been longing for some time. The need for space; simply to be alone. His disciples are in choppy waters out on

the Sea of Galilee. Sometime between 3 am and 6 am, just before the dawn, Jesus comes to them, terrified as they are, and simply says “Do not be afraid”.

In response – and this is immensely comforting for followers of Jesus – Peter, the leader of the Twelve, then does something that is both arrogant and stupid and Jesus must rescue him all over again.

That is what the life of faith looks like. Again, and again, we mess it up, but Jesus comes to rescue us all over again. “We don’t know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future” is one of those annoying lines – like the poem Footprints – which has at its heart a profound truth. Knowing who holds the future does not necessarily make us feel better or ward away our own pre-dawn darkness. But it is the deep truth about our human reality – that (to paraphrase Cardinal Basil Hume) we have a God who loves us completely in this life and will love us for ever.

I do not want to minimise in any way the challenges of the present for all of us and indeed for the world. The question I do want us to continue to ask is: what is God wanting us to notice through all this? What is God seeking to show us? That is about the big stuff: who we are; how we relate to one another; how we seek to love and serve.

Like rock-climbers with three points of contact with the rock and one arm or leg searching for the next step on the journey, God is inviting us through all of this to develop new muscles, enough “head space”, to accommodate changes that reach into every part of daily life.

And as for Lucy, she now lives in Aberdeen. Quite a way from the Arctic Circle, but about as far north as you can get for a UK mainland city.

With my thanks and best wishes.

Nicholas



NOTES:

VJ DAY: next Saturday (15 August) is VJ Day, marking the formal end of the war in Japan. Partly because of the way the war ended with the dropping of the first two nuclear bombs, and partly because of our emphasis on VE Day, the war in Japan is often overlooked. Here at Chelmsford Cathedral we will be marking this with a special ceremony at 6 am and in the daily prayer at 7.45 am and 5.15 pm. All of these will be streamed live on Facebook.

THE SUNDAY EUCHARIST: you no longer have to register to come along to the Sunday Eucharist – please simply come along. Do please arrive by 10.30 am at the latest. And do please note that from today onwards, the government regulations stipulate that everyone must wear a facemask (unless you are under 11 or exempt)

THE ANNUAL MEETING will take place on Sunday, 27 September straight after the 10.30 Sunday Eucharist. We are encouraged to make this as short as possible and it will finish by 12 noon. The papers will be out well in advance of the meeting and you will have the opportunity to submit questions in advance. The meeting will be live in the Cathedral and will also be live on Facebook.