

Festivals of Light

'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

These words from the prologue to John's Gospel are a favourite at our Carols by Candlelight services. The author of John's Gospel points us towards the coming of Jesus as the One who brings us light and life and hope. In doing so, the author chooses an ancient symbol: light – which reminds us that the dark times will not prevail and of the hope focussed on the glimmers of light when all else seems hidden.

From an inter-faith perspective, it would be nearly impossible to find a religious tradition that doesn't honour light in some form: perhaps the most ancient religions worshipped the sun whose light brought warmth and the stars which lit the night sky. The sun represented a power larger than themselves; it was to be honoured and respected for its life-giving properties. Before artificial light became the predominate way to illuminate our nights and days, our also ancestors spent countless hours staring into the night skies attempting to fathom something beyond themselves. Such mighty powers certainly needed to be understood! Some suggest this was the beginning of religion. Certainly this interest in light and darkness pervades nearly all religion, both sacred and secular: is it any coincidence that our own Bonfire Night also precedes the darkest part of the year?

Along with the sun, fire was also a powerful source of light and warmth. The invention of ways for mankind to produce and control fire was another occasion producing awe and worship. Zoroastrians as still known as 'fire worshippers' because of their elaborate rituals involving a sacred flame, though they are careful to clarify that they are not worshipping the fire but the divine source behind it. The ancient Celts built bonfires to mark the seasons and worked hard daily and nightly to keep the hearth fires burning. We humans learned how to domesticate fire; the warmth and light also brought comfort and perhaps safety in keeping wild animals at bay. If one could control fire, could one also control the divine? Or is it more a matter of respect for knowing and observing the boundaries between safety and risk?

Our own Advent wreaths, Christingle, and Carol services usually feature candles; even Christmas trees of the past were candle-lit. Often these 'candles' are now artificial, reflecting our long history of trying to control the destructive potential of fire. Every congregation will have at least one story of the artificial flower arrangement going up in flames at the Carol service! How safe must our worship of light be? Must our worship only be *safe* or are we confining our full experience of worship by insisting on our own safety?

Respect for flame also reminds us that even a pinprick of light can conquer the darkness. The lighting of the eight candles of the menorah during the Hanukkah festival still connects Jewish people with the hope that was theirs during the recovery of Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile during the time of the Maccabean revolt. Though the community seemed to have very little oil remaining for their lamps during a dark time, it was enough to last through the eight days when indeed victory was theirs!

Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains all celebrate the festival of Divali (or Deepavali) during the period leading to the darkest time of the year. A 'diva' is a tiny oil lamp (more like a bowl) made of clay and filled with oil and a wick. It's very tricky to get all the divas filled and the wicks burning just right, but the sight of dozens or hundreds or even thousands of divas lit in the darkness is simply beautiful. Like the Hanukkah candles, the divas celebrate various stories

of gods and goddesses that illustrate the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance. I have fond memories of celebrating Divali in India; indeed, *everyone* in the community celebrated Divali, with new clothes, with delicious food, with fireworks, but especially with divas. Here in the UK, many were introduced to Divali recently when our new Prime Minister, a practicing Hindu, started his position on Divali by lighting the divas outside No. 10 Downing Street.

When the author of John's Gospel speaks of the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it, he's reminding us of hope and goodness and perseverance in all that is Good and Right and True, even when to do so seems dangerous or illogical. We're also reminded of the immensity of light – that our attempts to confine or contain it can also be dangerous. God's light is bigger than ourselves. Rather than keep it narrowly restricted, we are to reflect it widely to others.

John's Gospel also reminds us that Jesus' coming to be with us is not just for an evening or a season or a brief celebration of a divine encounter but to persevere through all the challenges of darkness that are ahead. By coming to *be with us* (Emmanuel), God is entering into our own darkness and bringing us the created light of love and hope and joy. Our response is to honour and respect the Creator and Sustainer of Light; Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

■ Bonni-Belle Pickard