



## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent – 13th December 2020

One of the most revealing and interesting school visits I made was a visit to a coal mine. My dear father began work in the mines at the age of 14, he had to – that was the only work available to him, and so when I was given the opportunity to go down a coal mine – I wanted to see what my dear father endured day after day to give the family our ‘daily bread’ and to provide for me at Grammar school.

That visit changed my life as it shone light into the darkest hell hole. Thankfully it helped me to strive to secure a new form of work for my father and a new beginning – above ground – and thankfully he secured a new position in the light and fresh air. A new life.

In a lengthy interview before he died, the great sculptor Henry Moore, reflected on how in his early years working in a Yorkshire mining village influenced his later work. He said:

*One of the first and strongest things I recall were the slag heaps, like pyramids, like mountains, artificial mountains. There were pit heaps all over – the great waste, the unburnable rubbish. We played about in them and got very dirty. I remember our street and I can see the sun just managing to penetrate the fog, and the coal heap at the end.*

His father was also a miner and he was very fond of baked apples for pudding, and little Henry had to go to their dank, dark cellar to fetch them. He remembered how frightened he was of the dark, and so he used to go down the steps sideways, always one eye on the lighted doorway. Later when he was carving deep into his sculpture he said he always felt he wanted to find a way out, remembering that cellar.

Many of Moore’s massive sculptured forms have holes in them (see the wonderful images at the end of this sermon on our LRS), but for him the holes have their own significance: what appears essential is left out – the light is let in.



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To many people, his sculptures are just puzzling, but to many others they have a massive dignity. In the mining village where he grew up there was always competition between the sun and the fog, between the daylight and the pitch black of the mines, between a small child and the enormous slag heaps. In his work, the light always wins, the child comes to shape the slag heaps into human form.

Today's Gospel begins with the absence of the light; John the Baptist is a witness to speak for the light, but he is not the light in person. John is the rugged figure whose task is described by the evangelists as laying low mountains and hills, shaping a path through the wasteland. He is God's sculptor, giving shape and form to an indeterminate mass of people, insisting always on the essential place of the light. When he faces critical opposition, he points away from himself to his work in preparing for the one to come.

John keeps declaring "I am not", in order to point to the one who can say, "I am". The identity of the one coming after John is unknown; but John is clear in his own mind that he is not the light. He must make way for the light; create a space for the light to shine through. And when people see the light, his own task is finished.

Like John, we are asked to make way for the light. None of us is the light: our role is to let the light through the chunks of solid darkness that litter our human landscape. That appears a mountainous task beside which our own abilities and commitment look so small. Who are we to compete against such large darkness?

Advent calls us to make what contribution we can. To look first at ourselves and work quietly on the darkness that hides within us – the selfishness, the lack of forgiveness and the lack of love that keep the light of the good news from so many people. On the larger social issues – like justice and peace – which require the witness of a caring community, we are challenged by the Gospel to work together.



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Like Henry Moore carving through stone until he comes to the light, we have to keep working our way towards the light that is Christ. Our work may appear fruitless or just odd to those who look at our efforts, but the space we create is significant. Holiness is the constant struggle of letting Christ be the light that shines through everything we do. So let our work puzzle people. Who cares when the light gets through?

**Amen**

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