A few weeks ago we took ourselves off the O2 arena in London to see the Irish rock band U2. For those of you who haven't heard of U2 they are one of the world's best-selling rock bands, selling over 170 million records worldwide. It was an incredible concert with 15-20,000 people, loud (of course), visually engrossing with an enormous ‘barricage’ (a barricade cage) the length of the arena on which vast screens bombard the audience with imagery before the band emerge from within it. It was a fabulous concert.

The final song of the set was a complete contrast to what had gone before. The noise, bright lights and flashing imagery stopped. The whole stadium was immersed into darkness: all the screens had gone; there were no instruments on the stages; the band had been dismantled. We were just left with the lead singer, Bono, on stage with a faint light marking his steps. And he sung of darkness and fear.

*And if the terrors of the night*

*Come creeping into your days*

*And the world comes stealing children from your room*

*When all you've left is leaving*

*And all you got is grieving*

*And all you know is needing*

*Hold on, Hold on*

What I found so moving about this moment in the concert was that for a few minutes we were invited to recognise the darkness, to acknowledge our fears, ‘the terrors of the night’, and to be truthful about the shadows.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. A season of calendars, chocolates, and consumerism. But amidst all of that, a season where we are invited to acknowledge the darkness, see it
for what it really is, and look with hope towards the light. And we begin the season with the reading from Luke’s Gospel:

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves’. (Luke 21: 25)

There is fear, fainting and foreboding. Images that begin our Advent aren’t of swaddling clothes, twinkly stars, fleecy lambs, but of reality of the world as it is. Jesus was warning his disciples of hard times ahead. Luke was writing to a people who were living in uncertain times. In AD 69 there was the threat of war in Judea, the Romans had laid siege to Jerusalem, the city faced civil strife and starvation, the Emperor had died. All the fixed points had been removed. And so this imagery best described the tumultuous times of the world as it really was, and is.

Thankfully we aren’t living through war or siege, but we are living in uncertain times. We don’t know what Brexit will bring, or what the result of the MP’s vote on 11th December will be. We hear rumblings in our news every day about the political and economic turmoil that may or may not be ahead of us.

Someone wrote that ‘Advent is not for the fainthearted’.

It’s a season where we are invited to dwell on the darkness and the shadows and not turn the light on too quickly. Advent is a time when we acknowledge the darkness of the world we live in: the sin, the suffering, the poverty, the greed. This is why our Advent Carol Service this evening will begin in darkness. It is because sometimes song, imagery and drama can help us to understand the theology, in ways that are far more powerful than merely words.

Generally speaking, we don’t like focussing too much on the dark things in life. Someone asks how we are and we say ‘fine, thank you very much’, regardless of whether or not that might be true.

Often when faced with challenged and dark times two reactions are common. One is that we run away from them: we distract ourselves. There are endless ways we can do this. Social media. Shopping. Drinking. Mindless TV. Countless ways in which we can turn on all the lights on and ignore the darkness.

The other is that we give in to the dark and begin to believe that this is all there is. We give up. We get cynical and lose hope: in ourselves, one another and in God.
Jesus speaks to both of these reactions when he says: ‘stand up, raise up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’ (Luke 21: 28)

Look at the fig tree, he says. Look at all the trees. There are signs of God’s kingdom here and now. Jesus points us to notice those signs of hope all around us. Next Spring’s seeds are already germinating in the dark winter soil. Just because we can’t see it growing doesn’t mean it isn’t happening.

In Advent we can acknowledge the shadows but have hope that the light has already come into the world. In amidst the darkness and uncertainty of our world we have hope, because as Christians we have the audacity to believe that God, the creator of heaven and earth, came amongst us, took the form of an infant child, lived, healed, taught and then died, taking upon himself all the darkness that the world could throw at him, and then rose again, heralding a new way:

‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it’ (John 1:5)

We don’t need to either hide from the dark, or give into it. We can face the dark, in the knowledge that we are not alone and that these times are not the full story. We can face it with hope.

Hope is not about false optimism – head in the sand, it will all be OK. Hope is ‘a conviction concerning the future which transforms our present in such a way that we feel secure in the here and now and ready for God’s future’ - (Bishop Sarah Mullaly in ‘A Good Year’). Confident that Christ will save us, that the best is yet to come, that his kingdom of justice will ultimately triumph. We can then live in the light of that hope.

Can we be people of hope in the world? People who are alert to what is good. Who look out for buds of Spring. People who don’t give in to the dark.

The Collect today is: ‘Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light’ Let us put on the armour of light, stand up, raise our heads, our redemption is drawing near.

While we still wait for Jesus’ complete redemption, we have good work to do in the meantime. And we undertake the good work of being Jesus’ disciples in the world:

• of giving compassion to those who are hurting,
• encouragement to those who are afraid,
• solidarity with those who are oppressed,
- resistance to evil,
- forgiveness for those who have wronged us,

Paul’s prayer to the Thessalonian’s: ‘may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you’ (I Thessalonians 3:12)

At the U2 concert when Bono was singing about the darkness in the world a single oversized lightbulb was lowered so that it hung by its flex at about head height just over the stage. He then pushed it so that it swung back and forth and around the stage and over the heads of the audience. The song is called ’13. There is a Light’ and was written in memory of those who died in the Manchester Arena bombing.

*If there is a light*

*We can’t always see*

*If there is a world*

*We can’t always be*

*If there is a dark*

*Now we shouldn’t doubt*

*And there is a light*

*Don’t let it go out*

*Hold on, Hold on.*

And with that Bono left the stage, the concert ended and we were left with the lightbulb swinging silently.