

*Gresham Lecture, Monday 28 March 2011*

**London at Night:**

**Spirituality and the Dark Side**

The Revd Nicholas Holtam,

St Martin’s in the Fields

**Introduction**

On Saturday perhaps as many as 500,000 people demonstrated against ‘the Cuts’. A day of protest and anger, mostly in good humour, gave way to an extraordinary mix in the evening of the still good humoured, people out for a usual Saturday night in the West End, relatively very small numbers of people causing trouble, and riot Police lined across the street on each corner of St Martin-in-the-Fields trying to regain control of the city. The audience at the evening concert in church left by the side door so as to do so safely but there had been a a lot of noise and shouting along the south side of the church through the music, as there had been during the student riots in November when a near riot in Duncannon Street provided an extraordinary counterpoint for 550 people listening prayerfully to John Tavener’s ‘Towards Silence’.

On Sunday morning we woke early to find the streets cleaned, Trafalgar Square empty and only graffiti and a few placards as evidence of what was still in full flood when we went to bed at well gone midnight the night before. What happens to ‘London After Dark’ is that the day dawns and London begins again.

**St Martin-in-the-Fields**

Since 1916, Dick Sheppard and the First World War, St Martin’s has been known as ‘The church of the ever open door’. That’s a name which always risks disappointment as it isn’t but there is something going on 24 hours a day and the city goes on around us.

St Martin’s is ‘the world’s local church’. St Martin’s is the parish church of Buckingham Palace and Downing Street as well as of many of London’s homeless people. In an ordinary week about 800 attend the regular services that are the heart beat of any church. We also host a considerable number of special services which may be personal (a Golden wedding thanksgiving or memorial service), parochial (the annual service for a business headquartered in the parish), or of national or international significance (the 50th anniversary of Amnesty International). These mean that 80,000 a year come to church services at St Martin’s. Our congregations reflect the nature of London. We have services in English and Chinese; our Cantonese speaking congregation being nearly 50 years old, our Mandarin speaking congregation being just 7 years. Within the English speaking congregation there are people with, at the last count, 14 different first languages. The church’s mission statement is:

St Martin-in-the-Fields exists to honour God by being an open and inclusive church that enables people to question and discover for themselves the significance of Christianity.

St Martin’s is also a major tourist attraction and, as a point of principle, entry is free. We do not have an endowment but do have a business plan. In a commercial extension of the church’s ministry of hospitality and welcome, the Café in the Crypt feeds 300,000 people a year and something like 120,000 come to concerts at St Martin’s, a mix of free and open to everyone at lunch time and ticked on 3 or 4 evenings a week.

We run a Chinese People’s Day Centre and one of the largest day centres for homeless people in Europe. In 2008 The Connection at St Martin’s served just under 5,000 clients. That number has grown by 600 in each of the last 2 years and now stands a little over 6,000 people a yerar. Unlike with the church, café and concerts, increased numbers coming through the door is not a sign of success. We are there for people who have fallen through all the other safety nets of British society and find themselves unable to cope at the centre of the capital city. 30% of our clients come from London, 30% from the rest of the UK, 20% from elsewhere in the EU and 20% from the rest of the world. We cannot work with everyone who presents themselves to us. The current form of a dilemma that has faced St Martin’s from the beginning of its work with homeless people, is that if someone does not have recourse to public benefits there is very little we can offer them apart from maintaining them with dignity by providing food and washing facilities. The risk is that these people block the services offered to others who are able to *make use of* the help we can provide *and move on*. Our main aim is to help people pick themselves up and gain confidence and trust so that they can move to sustainable lives either by returning to where they came from or by moving into appropriate accommodation, which is likely to mean hostels or supported accommodation. We also have a programme called Workspace to prepare people for and help people find employment. Last year we helped 80 people into work.

Since the turn of the millennium, because of concerted efforts by government, the local authority and voluntary sector, it is claimed there has been a 75% reduction in the number of rough sleepers in London, even more so across the country. The numbers are disputed, and there are always questions about who is or isn’t included, but everyone agrees there has been a huge change for the better, the result of successful cooperation. Westminster City Council has been a very constructive and leading player in this partnership. The street count on Thursday night identified 82 people sleeping on the streets in Westminster. To that should be added 25 who are what are known as A 8’s and A 2’s[[1]](#footnote-2). In addition we had 37 people at the Night Centre at The Connection at St Martin’s making a total of 145.

The aim of reducing the number of rough sleepers in London to zero was always unrealistic. There are always new people arriving who come here because it is the capital city more than because there is provision for homeless people. The task of The Connection at St Martin’s is to help London manage the problem of homelessness and to offer opportunity to the people who get caught up in the nexus of issues associated with street homelessness. As an organisation we are encouraged by the Mayor of London’s strategy of early intervention with its target of no second night on the street. We are not wholly opposed to coercion and we accept that we have to limit access to our services in order to be effective in what we do. The organisations working in this sector offer a version of ‘tough love’ which is realistic when working on one aspect of what might be described as a ‘dark side’ of this vibrant, creative, affluent world-class city.

**Banishing the Dark Side?**

For the last 11 years Westminster City Council has led in creating the partnerships that have served so well and produced significant success. It was therefore quiteextraordinary that in a consultation which ended last Friday, Westminster City Council were proposing a new ‘Byelaws for good rule and government... for the prevention and suppression of nuisances’. They proposed to criminalise lying down and sleeping in a public place or putting down any materials used or intended to be used as bedding in or on any public place.

This draft byelaw would also have criminalised the distribution of free refreshment in or on any public place or knowingly to permit any person to distribute any free refreshment in or on any public place.

There were exemptions about the distribution of free refreshments, of course. The proposed byelaw would not apply

(a) to persons taking part in a sporting event;

(b) on any premises on which there is in force a premises licence...

(c) if the distribution is of samples of refreshments and is carried out for marketing purposes on land adjacent to retail premises in which the same refreshments are available for sale;

(d) by the Council or any health authority (or any person acting on behalf of the Council or any health authority) exercising powers to protect public health.

Any person offending against these Byelaws would be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale, which I take to be a fine of up to £500. It does seem odd to threaten a homeless person with a fine of up to £500 as it is criminalise people providing food to poor people.

I am glad to say there has been there has been uproar and it was reported at the end of last week that by the Leader of the House of Commons, Sir George Young, said on Thursday to the Shadow Leader Hilary Benn, that Westminster are going to adopt a more “enlightened approach” and not legislate about the reduction of rough sleeping and soup runs but will consult in order to seek a continued reduction.

If so, that will be the right outcome but this consultation has strained relations between organisations that need to be partners. One of the lessons is that you cannot legislate to banish the dark side. Those who are homeless would not have gone away. Instead of criminalising homeless people it would be better to ask what we can learn from them, to understand their experience of how and why they became homeless and to help them take greater responsibility for themselves.

**Acknowledging the Dark Side - Night Walks**

The greatest of my twentieth century predecessors, Dick Sheppard, spent a night out on the streets before he became Vicar. He wanted to know what the parish was like at all times of day and night. The consequence is that at his induction he was able to articulate a vision out of which, to some extent, St Martin’s still lives:

I saw a great church standing in the greatest square in the greatest city of the world. And I stood on the west steps and I saw what this church would be to the life of the people.

There passed me into its warm inside, hundreds and hundreds of all sorts of people, going up to the temple of their Lord, with all their difficulties, trials and sorrows. I saw it full of people dropping in at all hours of the day and night. It was never dark, it was lighted all night and all day, and often and often tired bits of humanity swept in.

And I said to them as they passed: 'Where are you going?' And they said only one thing: 'This is our home. This is where we are going to learn of the love of Jesus Christ. This is the altar of our Lord, where all peace lies, this is St Martin's."

Paying attention to the dark side can give vision. Most of us are not inquisitive enough, or are too frightened, to befriend the dark side of the city and of ourselves, which is so easily mis-read. The sculptor Josefina da Vasoncellos, who died in 2005 aged 100, used to work in the 1950’s in one of the old burial vaults at St Martin-in-the-Fields. In old age she told me that when cleaning up one night and washing in the toilets, the ‘ladies of the night’ came into put on their make-up. “What do you do?”, one of them asked. Josefina explained that she was a sculptor and received a reply which she would have used for the title of her unwritten autobiography: “You’re a good tart wasted”! Well she wasn’t: she was a great sculptor fulfilled, but is easy to misread the dark side of our natures and our city and the fear of the night is the fear of the dark side overwhelming us.

Charles Dickens loved walking into the City of London from his rooms in Covent Garden after business hours, or on a Saturday, or better still on a Sunday, and roam its deserted nooks and corners. An essay written in 1860 called ‘Night walks’ begins,

Some years ago, a temporary inability to sleep, referable to a distressing impression, caused me to walk about the streets all night for a series of several nights...

From midnight till dawn, as cure for his distress,

 I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness...

Walking the streets under the pattering rain, Houselessness would walk and walk and walk, seeing nothing but the interminable tangle of streets, save at a corner, here and there, two policemen in conversation, or the sergeant or inspector looking after his men. Now and then in the night – but rarely – Houselessness would become aware of a furtive head peering out of a doorway a few yards before him, and, coming up with the head, would find a man standing bolt upright to keep within the doorway’s shadow, and evidently intent on no particular service to society... The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river.

Dickens befriended the lonely streets as he did graveyards and “shy neighbourhoods”. He was able to describe it vividly and to distinguish between loveable rogues and wickedness. His novels are deeply moral tales and I thought his ‘General Prayer fro Charity’ which the Dean of Westminster Abbey used recently is beautifully turned.

Make us O Lord remember that it is Christianity to do good always, even to those who do evil to us, to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to do to all men as we would have them do to us; to be gentle, merciful and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts and never make a boast of them; but always to show that we love thee by humbly trying to do the right in everything; that thus remembering the life and lessons of our Lord Jesus Christ and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that thou wilt forgive us our sins and mistakes and enable us to live and to die in peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Charles Dickens (1812–1870)*

*General Prayer for Charity from the Archives of Westminster Abbey*

I often walk at night. Last Thursday night I went with one of the Outreach Team from The Connection at St Martin’s to see with them what is going on with rough sleeping. It was early – 8.30 – 10.30pm. I was surprised how few rough sleepers we met, though the numbers became larger or more obvious as the evening went on.

Conversations were impressive, focussing on the needs of the individuals. They were structured, responsive, persistent: we can offer you more that you think; it’s not safe to e on the streets; we can link you with the last place you lived (an Outer London Borough).

Things aren’t as they seem. A young woman in a cardboard box near the Opera House has at least one place to live, and we think two. 4 men on the steps of Theatre Royal knew me from coming into church: “We’re the well behaved ones”, one said, and from my point of view they are. The worker I was with said that the trouble is they aren’t the well behaved ones. One’s story doesn’t add up and there’s something undeclared. We’ve helped him into accommodation three times and it has worked for a time (6 months, a few weeks) and then he disappears. Either its drugs, alcohol or gambling... but until he wants to do something about that we can’t help him into accommodation. The other 3 were drinkers, though one had been dry for months and seems to be on the edge of being able to get back into work (which for him is running a bar and that has got him into trouble before).

Some people we could not help. A man in his 50’s or early 60’s from Lithuania had been helped to go home a year ago but he has recently returned. We can do nothing to help him, but it was a friendly, firm conversation.

A Chinese man has no identity and no one will take responsibility for him. Immigration cases are complex and some people get lost in the system.

When we open church at 7.30am every morning for the last few months about 30 mostly men come into church. They fall asleep very quickly as they have been out all night. One travels on the night busses, others gamble what little they have as a way of staying in the warm and in the hope one day they will win. Others have tried to bed down but get moved on every 2 hours. Some of them are unable to access the services for homeless people because they do not have recourse to benefits. These are some of the people who depend on food handouts from what are called soup runs, though there is agreement there is over provision. None of them has made a lifestyle choice to be here.

**How It Is**

About a year ago when I agreed to give this lecture there was a large black steel box in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, ‘ How it is’ by Polish sculptor Miroslaw Balka. This giant structure with a vast dark chamber reflected the surrounding architecture - almost as if the interior space of the Turbine Hall has been turned inside out. It stood on 2 metre stilts, was 13 metres high and 30 metres long. Visitors could walk underneath it and hear the echoing sound of footsteps on steel, or enter via a ramp into a pitch black interior, which was intended to create a sense of unease. The Tate said Miroslaw Balka’s box of darkness is disturbing in its historical echoes but beautiful as well. *The Times* said thatBalka's black hole is terrifying, awe-inspiring and thought-provoking. *The Guardian* said it embraces you with a velvet chill.

It was a fabulous and fascinating idea and exceptionally difficult to create. There were anxieties at Tate Modern about health and safety and it was disorientating to enter the black box. It needed patience because after a few minutes eyes adjusted and it was possible to see a little in the darkness. Even so the relief of reaching the end wall was considerable and of turning and seeing people against the light making the same journey. People stayed, silently waiting in what was, I thought, comfortable rather than threatening darkness.

I had anticipated that people would help each other and exploring the darkness would not be just an individual experience. It was disappointing that, at least on the occasion I was there, people didn’t help each other and kept to themselves. Perhaps that is an indication of the fear and isolation of darkness and an indicator of ‘How it Is’.

The Russian St Seraphim of Sarov observed, “The darker the night the brighter the stars”.

**Spirituality and the Dark Side**

Churches make good use of light and dark. The Epistle from the Book of Common Prayer at the 8am Holy Communion yesterday ended:

Awake , thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

 *Ephesians 5.14*

John’s Gospel in particular speaks of Christ as the light of the world. Its great Prologue asserts that, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it”. In the National Gallery this light is depicted in the familiar Christmas card of the ‘The Adoration of the Shepherds’ in a Dutch barn from the school of Rembrandt, as it is in Honthorst’s ‘Christ before the High Priest’. In Luke’s Gospel the glory of the Lord shone around angels lighting up the night sky to announce the birth of Jesus. This is in marked contrast to the darkness that fell at noon on Good Friday.

Early on Easter morning, just before dawn, in churches up and down the country small groups of people will gather in the dark before dawn for the vigil of readings of our salvation history. As the dawn nears, at St Martin’s we will go out on to the portico and light a new fire outside the church before coming back in carrying the Easter candle. It is amazing how much light is given by this solitary flame and by the joy with which it is spread around the church by those gathered lighting candles and spreading around the church. Light and dark is powerfully symbolic for religion.

In church, yesterday was the third Sunday of Lent. At St Martin’s we have a series of sermons for Lent at the 10am Eucharist and addresses by lay members of our congregation at 6.30pm, exploring themes from Psalm 130, “Out of the depth have I cried to you O Lord.” So far people have spoken about Grief, Pain and Refugees: “Out of the depths”. One of the emerging themes is the psychological insight that what we do not acknowledge about ourselves will not go away and will create an undertow that becomes ever more difficult to suppress. Here is what Philippa Smethurst, a Counsellor and Psychotherapist, said the other Sunday night.

People who embark on psychotherapy or counselling are troubled in some way that they find difficulty in understanding or changing by themselves. So either willingly or unwillingly they embark on a process of exploration which involves ‘descent’.

Seeing things more clearly can be a relief, an illumination and bring a sense of space and lead to greater creativity. But the process of uncovering these feelings and truthful things can feel extremely frightening for a person and like something that should be resisted at all costs.

One [of the things I have observed] is that we can bear more pain than we think we can. People very often say ‘I cannot cry! If I do I will never stop’. It is common fear but I have never sat with anyone who never stops crying. Our bodies, our minds regulate our pain and even though some people go through deep psychological pain and suffering, if we lean into it rather like a sailing boat leans into the wind and bear the pain and know what it is that will be generally be better for us than covering or pushing it down.

Better for us? I suppose I mean that there will be some ‘movement’ for the pain, somewhere for it to go.

Most of us manage for most of our lives without the help of a counsellor or psychotherapist and can deal with life’s processes by ourselves and with the help of family and friends. However, Socrates was right to say that the unexamined life is not worth living. Some of us avoid facing up to psychological pain for as long as we can and some are especially good at finding avoidance and displacement activities. Some say that is exactly what religion is.

I, of course, disagree, and think that to be human is to be religious. We can’t avoid the sense of wonder and that there is more to life than meets the eye. The power of the second creation story at the beginning of the Book of Genesis is that no scientific account of creation could describe with such power what it is for us to be human, creatures who get themselves out of place in relation to our creator and the creation, and who experience guilt and shame. Adam and Eve hid among the trees because had been ‘caught out’ for having disobeyed God. It is a myth which puts us in touch with our nature. That it is the second creation story in the Book of Genesis is a pretty good clue that we’re not dealing here with science or history and I simply don’t understand why people like Richard Dawkins feel the need to be so literal about it as if there were only one way of telling the truth. The whole experience of Lent is of our standing honestly before God, as it were in the desert, and recognising our mortality.

In what is common wisdom, Christianity identifies truth and love, much as the Greeks identified goodness and truth. Good religion and good spirituality has to address our whole human nature, the dark side and the light and therefore churches cannot afford only to address the day. Some services are required to take place by law in daylight, a wedding for example, where there must be no risk of deception, but we notice that night time services have a stillness and focus quite different to anything that can be achieved in the day light.

**Night Church**

St Martin’s has a Mission Action Plan. It identifies St Martin’s ministry as liturgy and preaching which engages with the issues of the day. Prayer, music, education, the caring service of others and the building of international relationships are part and parcel of our response to God in Jesus Christ and point to the kingdom of God. They are ‘the pillars of St Martin’s’.

The MAP has four Aims:

Developing and sustaining the church community

e.g. growth in numbers and depth, communications and so on.

Expressing inclusiveness and welcome

e.g. by developing the theology of an open and inclusive church, welcoming visitors, dialogue with other faiths, having something creative on offer in relation to the Olympics and developing a ministry to assylim seekers, migrants and refugees.

Building a Sustainable Future

which is mainly about our finances, organization and making the most of the renewed buildings

Extending the Ministry

into areas which seem particularly significant at the moment e.g. the environmental challenge that faces all of us, matters of work and faith.

It is in this last area of extending the ministry of St Martin’s that we have become interested in the Scandinavian experience of ‘Night Church’. We have gained life and purpose by being ‘the church of the ever open door’ and yet every evening at between 8 and 10pm, with the exception of the Night Centre for homeless people in The Connection at St Martin’s, we close until the following morning. In a number of Scandinavian cities, starting in Oslo and spreading to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki and other cities, the Church has been experimenting with new opening times.

In Copenhagen on Thursday, Friday and Sunday from 8pm – midnight, three churches remain open. On a few nights they might go through the night, as with the Vigil to Easter morning. Their purpose is to have different kinds of services for people who do not otherwise engage with church, not to allow people in need of accommodation to stay the night. There’s a degree of experiment. The emphasis in church is on quiet, lights, music (of various sorts from modern bands to Gregorian chant). In the course of the evening there are spaces between services or happenings. So, there is a structure, space and conversation.

It is to help people end the evening in a nice way.

As well as worship, there is a lot of room and an emphasis on providing opportunities of speaking with a Pastor. They have a specialist team of pastors for this work and have built the team’s experience for what has become specialist ministry. One of the churches has also developed a team of street pastors, a concept becoming familiar in London.

The Danish Minister in London described to me “Job’s corner”, a place were people leave their lamentations. They also have a prayer box and at the last service of the evening the prayers are read by the Pastor.

We have had a few experiments in this direction at St Martin’s. London is a great deal bigger and more difficult than the Scandinavian cities but when we have been open as part of something else it has been successful. A late concert works for some; a late night arts talk about an installation in Trafalgar Square attracted very few. Late night prayers for a Christian environmental group before an overnight protest worked well. On the night in 2005 that thousands gathered in Whitehall to Make Poverty History, church was packed for a service and for 2 hours of prayers that followed it. The Cafe in the Crypt had to send out for more supplies in the small hours of the morning. We will continue to test the ideas.

In some places, Night Church ends with Holy Communion. Perhaps that is the rather obvious and conventional conclusion to this lecture about Spirituality and the Dark Side. It is there in the foundational story which gathers Christians today, “*On the night that he was betrayed Jesus* had supper with his friends and taking bread and wine he gave thanks to God saying this is my body... this is my blood... Do this in memory of me.” It is the way of the cross and it does not get darker. It is also the way to the new life of light of the resurrection and Easter Day.

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1. When the EU expanded in May 2004, certain limitations were placed on the entitlements of citizens from 8 out of 10 of the accession countries: Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Nationals from these Accession 8 (A8) countries can come to the UK to work but can have limited or no access to social provisions and benefits. The two nations that acceeded in 2007, Romania and Bulgaria (A2 nationals) are subject to further restrictions.

They require a work permit in order to commence employment in the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)