

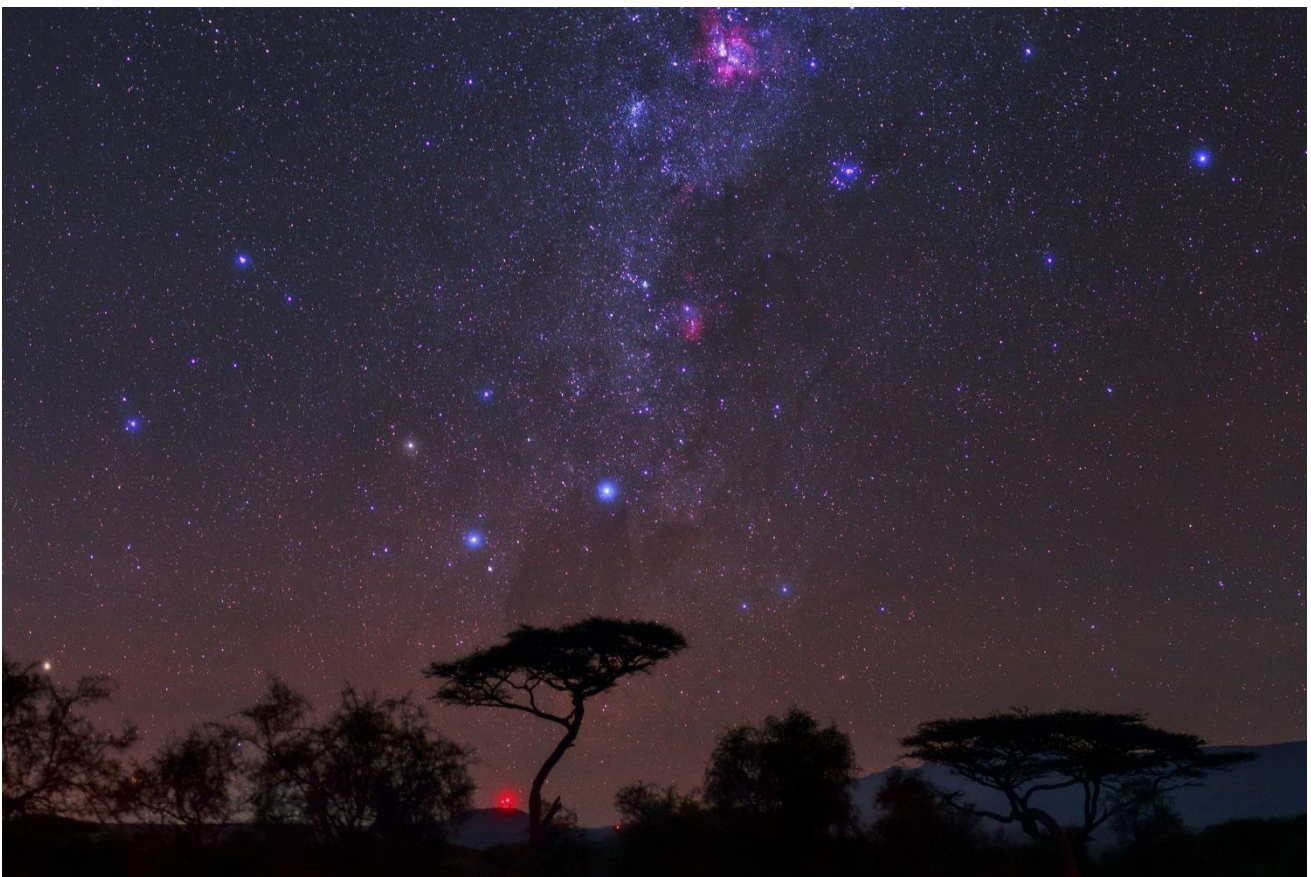
Night sky

25th December 2022

Night sky – how fabulous it is to see the southern cross or Orion on a clear night! The night sky figures in our readings tonight/ today and so I thought I would explore this theme with you. Some years ago, we had a young man from Singapore stay with us at the farm. He was amazed looking out at the stars from the house but we said, ‘Oh there’s still some light pollution because of the house. We can show you what it looks like out a bit further- and pointed beyond the house to the paddocks not too far away. This young man, Isaac was his name- had never seen the stars quite like that because in Singapore the population is vast and the landmass is so small so there is always light pollution.

That night he was awe struck- and we were all touched both by experiencing vicariously his first time seeing the night sky in all its splendour, and just because it is amazing! The night sky has the largest presence- the vastness of the milky way when there are no other lights is quite awe-inspiring! We are reminded of Psalm 8: *when I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have ordained, what are mortals in your memory!*

The night sky moves us to awe!



Our first Bible reading also uses the night sky to get across God’s promised future Kingdom of love and wholeness- ‘salvation’ as Jesus and other New Testament writers called the restored relationship with our Father God that Jesus makes possible. Of course, this theme of God reaching out to humanity in love and forgiveness goes way back into the ancient stories of Abraham (another night sky story), Joseph, King David and many others.

Isaiah speaks out God's message at a time when the people of Israel despair of ever having peace in their land. He says: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined.*

We all have times of 'deep darkness', those 'night times of the soul' as we go through life-times when people we care about are under intense pressure, or when we may lose hope because there seems to be simply too many issues to face. And Isaiah speaks into these dark situations, reminding us that God has broken the power of whatever it is that is oppressing us or our loved ones.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken v4. But God's way is to offer the peaceable solution- not to rush in and 'zap' our opponents. Isaiah's prophesy points to Jesus who would come and spiritually draw heaven down to us and enable people to enter God's presence: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

In the birth narratives of Jesus, the night sky also has a special place, guiding the Magi on their spiritual quest as they come a bit later in the chronology to worship the young Christ-child. The Shepherds too, we can imagine out in the night, looking up at the stars. I do wonder about those *shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.* As they were looking up at the night sky, did they think they could see an especially bright star? And then it seemed to grow larger and larger until they realised that this was no ordinary star! Because *an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.* Understandably, *they were terrified.* Who wouldn't be with an angel breaking into our world from heaven, illuminating the night sky with the glory of the Lord? God's glory burned so bright that they were quite reasonably scared witless! *But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy.*

When angels break into our human existence, people's reaction seems to often be one of fear. Yet this angel seems to expect this and so is ready with the 'Do not be afraid' response before these shepherds can even stammer out in their fear. God's approach to us is always welcoming and God always wants to bring us to wholeness, to help us find the joy which surrounds us. Sometimes, we may need to leave behind our old habits which are not leading us to fullness of life. Following Jesus certainly means that there will be times of leaving behind- just like the shepherds had to leave their flocks to experience this joy. *This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'* The night sky figures in many Christmas carols- *the stars in the bright sky look down where he lay.* Let's hold this image for a moment. The sky watches everything- holds all this cosmic energy and reflects back a little of God's being on us. The night sky is a background against we look and wonder-it points to a mystery which is beyond our grasp.

Gradually we may come to realise that we are not so much looking out to God but God is looking to us. God's love is bigger than night or day. God sees the laughter, the tears, the fear, the beauty of human life. We are part of God's love-song of life, day by day. God invites us into this. We respond, not because we are trying to win God's favour but because

God first loved us. God chose the path of reconciliation. Strength became weak; God, the almighty, the creator of those amazing stars, took on human flesh with all the vulnerability of a newborn baby. God's sole purpose was to enable us- men, women and children to find our way back into fellowship with God and into right relationships with each other. That is the point of Christmas- God broke into our humans limitations to achieve what we cannot alone – peace with God and fullness of life, where we are free to accept others, to forgive ourselves and those who 'trespass against us'.

Our Candle liturgy at the start of the service reminded us of the four great gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love. Four candles, four promises continually offered to us by God. In Christ we find the hope of transformation, the peace that follows justice, the joy of self-fulfilment in community, and the love that encompasses us in all our diversity, empowering us to make our own unique contribution to this world. In Christ we find light and life, and the courage to be like him, answering his call and following in his footsteps. His voice is undimmed by the centuries, His call and his promise as clear to us as it was to his disciples so long ago. Jesus invites us into a deeper relationship....and often like the night sky, this very notion seems too immense to grasp and so we have to respond with a plea; 'Come to my heart Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for you.'

May the light of Jesus' life be kindled in us and lead us to the shining truth of Emmanuel- God with us, God for us, God in us. In Christ we find light and life, and the courage to be like him, answering his call and following in his footsteps.

Let us pray – Lord God, you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Saviour of all, lying in a manger: on this holy night/day draw us into the mystery of your love. May we find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord, and yet our brother who walks beside us. Amen

