

Introduction

In the beginning there was darkness

'The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep' (Gen. 1.2). The Bible begins with darkness and shapelessness, with the loss of form and with the experience of the abyss. Can I not say, as a blind person, that the Bible begins at the place where I now find myself? When you are in the dark, your surroundings lose their shape. As someone who has passed through the loss of sight, have I not experienced the shapelessness of the void? The first thing the Bible tells me about blindness is that there is a connection between it and the earliest creative presence of the Holy Spirit.

'Then God said: "Let there be light"' (v. 3). In this part of the Bible, we are not told that God was the creator of darkness. The darkness had priority; it was already there, the first fact to be acknowledged. Elsewhere, we learn that God also created the darkness (Isa. 45.7); what we learn here is that God created the light and separated it from the darkness.

For me, the loss of sight was also an experience of separation. There is a great divide between the world perceived by sighted people and that perceived by blind people. The two realms are separate. In Genesis, we might think at first that light, once created, would abolish the darkness, but this is not what happened; darkness found a place in the night, and the night was separated from the day – separated, but joined.

This is characteristic of the experience of blind people, for whom many separations in life are both sharp and blurred.

One is joined closely to the very people from whom one is separated so sharply. The distinction between day and night, the distinction upon which the whole of this poem of creation depends, has a different meaning for blind people. Day is separated from night by a cycle of activity and rest, not by a cycle of light and darkness.

'And God saw that the light was good' (Gen. 1.4). Now we know what we have suspected throughout this passage: God is not on the side of blind people. God pronounces as good something that means nothing to those who are totally blind, and that is a source of longing and frustration, perhaps even despair, for those who still have a little sight. Here we come upon one of the great stumbling blocks that the Bible places in the way of blind people. It speaks of values that, for them, cannot be values. It announces that God is on the side of, and has a preference for, a world that is not their world – a reality to which they have no access.

'God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night' (v. 5). God calls it the night, and in naming it becomes its Lord and gives it a place. 'There was evening and there was morning, the first day' (v. 5). The day was made up of evening and morning, and included both darkness and light. The darkness is now equal to the light: each occupies half of the day. Moreover, the order is now reversed; although God first called the light day and only afterward called the darkness night, when the union of the two halves is described evening is mentioned first. Just as the world begins in darkness, so does the day begin with evening. No longer regarded as chaotic, formless and void, this named and recognized darkness is given an ordered place within the world that God is making. What God has named, God will redeem. 'And God saw that it was good' (v. 10).

'And on the seventh day, God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day . . . So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it' (Gen. 2.2-3). The seventh day, like the preceding days, begins at sunset. God's rest begins

with the night; the night is the source of refreshment and contemplation from which the restfulness of the morning and the afternoon must spring. When God blessed the day, both the evening and the morning were blessed.

We can see now how darkness has made progress. At first, it was regarded as a horrifying abyss, an amorphous nothingness, but then it was named and placed within the day. As such it was seen by God to be good. Goodness, however, was not enough. When we reach the seventh day, the darkness is not only good, it is sanctified by God's rest. It is declared to be holy. The darkness is blessed along with the morning and becomes the Sabbath of God. The God who brooded over the darkness, bringing it into the shape of separation and recognizing it, now completes this work by bringing the darkness and the light into a sacred unity.

I now realize that my first thought – that God is not on the side of the blind – was too hasty. God is the one who broods over blindness, calling it out of shapelessness and confusion, giving it a place of beauty and order in the fullness of creation. God blesses blindness and hallows it.

We read the Bible through the world in which we ourselves are embedded. When I was sighted, I read the Bible as a sighted person because I was embedded in the sighted world. It did not occur to me that I was sighted; I was just a normal person. Then I became blind. After the initial shock and the sense of alienation from my former life and my former world, once again I became a normal person. But the Bible seemed to have become abnormal. It came from a strange world – the world of sighted people, which was no longer mine.

In these chapters I will enter into conversation with the Bible from my point of view as a blind person. I describe these as conversations because I am conscious of the fact that what the Bible says to me has changed since I lost my sight. This is not only true of the places where there is specific reference to blindness, but of the text as a whole: when I realized that the Bible was written by sighted people, I felt alienated from it.

This book is the result of my gradually learning to begin a new conversation with the Bible – this time, as a blind person. It is mainly addressed to sighted people. Generally speaking, sighted people do not realize that they have a specific interpretation of the world. They just accept the world as a sighted world, because that is their experience. I hope that this book will do something to help sighted people realize the extent to which the Bible itself expresses their distinctive perspective.

Naturally, the book is also intended for blind readers who, like me, have passed beyond the light and are wondering where God is in the darkness.