

To give light to those who sit in darkness

Dear all, once upon a time there was a scientist called Dr Nelms. He was my father and he worked, in his early career, in Alaska and northern Scandinavia, on cold adaptation in people who lived in cold places. He collected many books by early explorers and when I first developed MND and was working out how to live my life I read them all. Through the long dark night of the northlands, above the Arctic Circle, where the sun does not rise for months at a time, the aurora borealis was very important to the Christian Inuit people in the books, because it reminded them that even in the long dark, God's light still shines.

It is very easy for people trapped in grinding poverty far to the north of this world to be fooled into thinking that the rich people further South, with their big shiny churches and big shiny cars and big shiny houses are much more important than poor people who live in cold one room tin shacks with no insulation, and depend on drilling holes through the ice to catch fish for food.

I have been trying to paint aurora for months. The only successful and serious painting I have ever seen of aurora borealis before the contemporary era was by Frederic Edwin Church in 1865, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurora_Borealis_\(painting\)#/media/File:Frederic_Edwin_Church_-_Aurora_Borealis_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurora_Borealis_(painting)#/media/File:Frederic_Edwin_Church_-_Aurora_Borealis_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) Frederic Edwin Church was a really interesting artist, who painted a lot of natural subjects, rainforests in Ecuador, volcanoes and aurora borealis. He was American and liked to paint large and spectacular landscapes. Like me, he had a penchant for rainbows, and for the same reasons. There is a very good article about him at the metropolitan Museum https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chur/hd_chur.htm

I have been trying on and off for some months to paint an aurora successfully. I have tried a sequence of approaches, being satisfied with none of them. Tonight I tried a different tack, using a highly modified configuration using the Dynamic Auto Painter watercolour brush set. In essence it is emulating thick opaque watercolour paint called Gouache, used in my hallmark pointillistic mode. The photo had all the hallmarks of a photograph which we don't notice because we are so used to seeing them, like the trees that lean out of the photo at either side. But artists never paint trees like that so if this was going to make a successful painting some work would be needed, as indeed it was. However it was worth it. My first effort painted for too long so the definition of the brushstrokes was lost and the trees were still a bit wonky. This second attempt is exactly as I imagined it.

Thinking about those Inuit Christians and the long dark night of the northlands and this painting suddenly clicked into a different perspective. That is why this painting is called 'To Give Light To The People Who Sit In Darkness'. Each one of those Inuit Christians may be among the poorest people on the planet in terms of resources, but God loves each one of them just as much as he loves the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church further south in the continent of America, where Catholicism is perhaps the commonest form of Christianity, especially in countries like Argentina, which everyone seems to be talking about at the moment for some reason. And the archbishops of the episcopalian Church in countries like the USA. And in the Megachurches of parts of the USA, with the Church leaders driven to services in stretched limos and pushing into lifts in front of women and talking loudly about important they are. Those powerful, rich Church leaders; God loves them no more and no less than the Inuit Christians far to the North.

So two scriptures spring into my mind, one is the same one as the last painting I did, Luke 1:78-79, this time taking the title from verse 79: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, **to give light to those who sit in darkness** and in the shadow of death, to guide our

feet into the way of peace.' The painting was a bit of a surprise, so I wasn't expecting to revisit this verse so quickly but there is little room for doubt.

The other scripture is the challenge to those rich and powerful Church leaders, stretched limos and luxurious Bishop's Palaces and all, and it is in Mathew, Mark, and Luke. Taking the Mark version, Mark 10:17-22, a rich young man kneels before Jesus. There's a strong start to the story, right there. He is an obedient young man but honest and goes away downcast because he knows he cannot bring himself to sell all his riches. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in 'The Cost of Discipleship, 1937) thinking about 'cheap grace', asks who is more honest, the downcast young man, or the rich and powerful people of the modern Church who regretfully hold onto their riches and by confessions think themselves put right with God (my paraphrase of Bonhoeffer's ideas).

Here is a translation of the relevant section of Bonhoeffer's book:

"If, as we read our Bibles, we heard Jesus speaking to us in this way to-day we should probably try to argue ourselves out of it like this: "It is true that the demand of Jesus is definite enough, but I have to remember that he never expects us to take his commands legalistically. What he really wants me to have is faith. But my faith is not necessarily tied up with riches or poverty or anything of the kind. We may be both poor and rich in the spirit. It is not important that I should have no possessions, but if I do I must keep them as though I had them not, in other words I must cultivate a spirit of inward detachment, so that my heart is not in my possessions." Jesus may have said: "Sell thy goods," but he meant: "Do not let it be a matter of consequence to you that you have outward prosperity; rather keep your goods quietly, having them as if you had them not. Let not your heart be in your goods."— We are excusing ourselves from single-minded obedience to the word of Jesus on the pretext of legalism and a supposed preference for an obedience "in faith." The difference between ourselves and the rich young man is that he was not allowed to solace his regrets by saying: "Never mind what Jesus says, I can still hold on to my riches, but in a spirit of inner detachment. Despite my inadequacy I can take comfort in the thought that God has forgiven me my sins and can have fellowship with Christ in faith." But no, he went away sorrowful. Because he would not obey, he could not believe. In this the young man was quite honest. He went away from Jesus and indeed this honesty had more promise than any apparent communion with Jesus based on disobedience." (The Cost of Discipleship, pp.79-80)

It is an interesting perspective. It certainly challenges me. Love, Grace and Peace from Rick