

## FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Genesis 1: 1-5, 26-31; John 1: 1-5, 10-13

Tony McAleer was living in darkness. It wasn't a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness. It all started when Tony joined a racist skinhead group called "The White Aryan Resistance." Racism gave Tony a way to externalize all the anger and hate that lived in his heart. From joining the group he rose up the ranks to become a recruiter and organizer. Tony focussed his hate in particular on Jews, blacks, immigrants, LGBTQI+ folk and women. Although he had a girlfriend, the group he was a part of saw women as useful for producing children, unless they were also tough and knew how to hate and commit violence.

Tony's journey into hate all started when he was a boy. Even though many white supremacists come from poor, working class homes, Tony grew up comfortably middle class. His father was a doctor. But he was also an emotional bully, and Tony learned early in life to distance from his feelings or else he would get knocked down again and again. Tony's mother wasn't much better. She was constantly putting Tony down and shaming him for every decision he made. Hate for others was a way to distance from the hate Tony felt for himself. All the psychological and emotional abuse he suffered was converted into violent rage. He was a perfect candidate for white supremacist recruitment.

But then, something happened to Tony that totally changed his life. A light so bright and so penetrating blinded him that it even shone right into the darkness of his soul. It was the beginning of a total transformation in Tony's life. Now Tony is the co-founder of the non-profit organization: "Life after Hate." It's mission is to help people leave hate groups. Tony has even written a book about his story, called: "The Cure for Hate." He writes about forgiveness and radical compassion. So, what was this light that shone into Tony's inner darkness? How did he get 'cured' of his hate? What caused him to experience a conversion to 'radical compassion' as he calls it?

Before we continue with Tony's story, let's ponder our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom. Both our readings speak about light shining in the darkness. Our first reading is from the first chapter of the bible. It's all about the

creation of the world. It's not a scientific account. It's not about the big bang, evolution or anything like that. Rather, it's about the purpose of creation. Purpose means there is meaning to creation. It's not just an accident. There is meaning behind it. It's all about love. But love is expressed using all kinds of words and images. Words and images evoke meaning. They work our imaginations. Love is not something visible or tangible. Love is energy flow between people and between living things. We read that before creation came into being there was no shape or colour. It was all a 'formless void' of darkness. The first thing that came to be was light. We read: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." And God continues to create with intention and love, and each 'day' of creation ends with God stepping back and beholding what has been created. And God delights in it all because it is so good. Finally, God creates humans within the diversity of male and female. God delights in them too. But God also gives them a special responsibility: to care for the earth and all its creatures, and to be fruitful and multiply. Love energy is expansive. It is fruitful and multiplies.

Now it's easy to think of creation as a physical thing. We are fruitful and we multiply physically. We have babies, we grow things, we spread out all over the planet. But love is also a qualitative thing, something of the heart and soul. Light is not just a physical thing. It is an inner quality, a guide, something that transforms who we are and who we are becoming.

And this is exactly the emphasis of our second reading from the gospel. Note how it begins: 'In the beginning...' It's also about creation. Except now, it's not about a physical creation but a spiritual recreation. 'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' We're no longer talking about a physical light but a spiritual, inner light. We're no longer thinking about physical multiplication and expansion but spiritual multiplication and expansion. Let me read further: 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.'

In some religious circles this is called being born again. It's not a physical birth but an inner spiritual rebirth. It's about inner light in the face of the darkness within. It's about transformation through love.

Now let's return to our story. Tony McAleer and his girlfriend were fighting all the time. When you're full of anger and hate, it's hard to control where it's directed. But something happened that changed everything. His girlfriend got pregnant. Tony couldn't believe it. It had to be a mistake. But then, he was shown the pregnancy tests. Tony was going to be a father. But the real change came when Tony's daughter was born. Here's how he describes it:

'I was terrified when the nurse handed her to me, afraid I was going to do something wrong, worried about not knowing how to hold her properly, as she was so tiny, fragile and delicate. But as I marvelled at the little human being squirming in my hands, she opened her eyes. At that moment, knowing that my face was the first picture her brain was going to take in, I connected to another human being for the first time since... I couldn't remember when. We were bonded. I felt a tingle start at the top of my scalp, travel down my body, and move out of my feet and into the floor. It was an intense sensation. I only knew one thing: that moment had changed me.'

Although it took time for Tony to totally cut himself off of his racist associations, his life changed dramatically. He began to see others as human beings, others who were different, others who had been the objects of his hate and disgust before. They too were human beings just like his little girl, human beings capable of loving and being loved. In time, Tony's whole life focus changed. Eventually he co-founded a non-profit organization called: "Life after Hate." He now makes it his mission to help people leave hate groups.

The physical birth of a child is the catalyst for a spiritual rebirth of a father. When we open our hearts to the energy of love flowing through living things, through life itself, we are changed. We, here, in the church call this love energy God. We call on God to move in and through us so that love will be fruitful and multiply through us into the world, bringing light into the darkness.

Annie's baptism is for us not only a celebration of the gift of biological life. No. It is also a recognition of the genesis of a spiritual journey. Through our gathering here, our use of water and words, we are channeling the love energy who is God into her so that her life journey is a spiritual journey of inner transformation, so that as she grows, the love energy in her will become fruitful and multiply into the world around her, so that the light shining ever more brightly in her will shine through to all who encounter her. If a white racist full of hate can be converted to radical compassion through love energy passing through a child, every one of us here can be transformed too. Spiritual rebirth is not just for the bad people out there in the world. It's for all of us here too. We all need greater light for the darkness because the darkness is all around us and in us too all too often.

Let us pray: shine your light of love into our darkness, O God... transform us within so that the love in us become fruitful and multiplies... Amen.