

Melvyn Matthews: Both alike to thee.

Melvyn Matthews had a varied career in the church at home and abroad and his last post was as Canon Chancellor of Wells cathedral until his retirement in 2005. He has written extensively and while some of his books are sadly out of print, this one is still available and is a real gem.

The title is a quotation from Psalm 139 ('the darkness and the light are both alike to thee') and the book is an attempt to encourage the church to ponder the things unseen.

He questions whether the church is too preoccupied with modern ideas of 'fulfilment', skimming across the surface of things rather than attending to the depths, preferring the light of truth to the darkness of mystery, noting that you need the darkness to see the glory of the stars.

He observes a fear of silence in the modern world exhorting the church to be a place where people can bring their inner emptiness without having to fill it with deceit. And he encourages the church to consider poetry rather than prose as it grapples with the important matters of faith, seeing the 'Dark Night of the Soul' not as an absence of faith but as an awareness of a reality beyond intellectual reason.

His conclusion is that many people have fled the shallow positivism that the church is offering into their own deserts to find their own truth and he laments that, given the church's rich mystical tradition, this is a missed opportunity. This book was written many years ago, but it still resonates strongly today. It speaks of a frustration with the church's priorities and points to a deep joy that faith can actually offer. It may have something particular to teach us in these difficult times when we have perhaps been forced by the current virus to 'do' less, as it invites us to exchange frantic activity for something slower and deeper, more sustaining and real.

