

**Christ Church, Georgetown**  
**Sermon, Christmas 2016**  
**The Rev. Timothy Cole**

*“The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not”*

One of the nice things about being a priest is that kind parishioners, from time to time, give you a really good book to read. At Christ Church, this being the amazing church that it is, this tends rather to be a case of kind parishioners giving you a really good book that they have written themselves!!

Well, I had just such a pre-Christmas present the other week and I won't embarrass the person by making their generosity or authorship public, but it looks like being a fascinating read and I was immediately grateful for the gift when I read the introduction to the book.

It spoke about a man called Jim Corbett who was a hunter and naturalist in India before and during World War II. He was an expert hunter, but he only hunted and killed man-eaters - those animals that, through hunger caused by age or injury, had overcome the natural fear of man that all wild animals have. Once they have killed a human, they discover that man is easy prey indeed and they become a real scourge to the villages and towns near the edge of the jungle. Corbett cared deeply for those people and for those animals.

Reading his name took me straight back to myself as a young boy listening with rapt attention to my father reading me two of Jim Corbett's books; *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* and *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*. What amazing titles, aren't they?

Corbett rejected the conventional way of hunting man-eating tigers, which was to get great armies of beaters and try and sweep through the jungle and corner the beasts. Instead, he went into the jungle alone, except for his small spaniel called Robin, and he would take the beasts on in their own environment.

My father met Jim Corbett because he was helping British soldiers to do their jungle training in India during the war. My father remembered him calling up a tiger in the jungle and bringing it very close by making its mating call. Dad and his soldiers were both impressed and afraid by equal measure!

*TIGER, tiger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare seize the fire?*

William Blake understood what Corbett knew well, that these magnificent beasts from the dark jungles of the world are not good or evil, they are just forces of the elemental world. The man-eaters were those whose purpose had been warped and twisted into the terror of human beings, but that was not their natural state.

*“The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not.”*

As we celebrate today the coming of the one true light, the light that “lighteth every man that cometh into the world,” we do well to reflect a little on the darkness against which this light shines.

There really are tigers out there. Great forces that are neither good nor evil but just there.

I was lucky enough to hear the journalist Thomas Friedman speak about his new book the other week. It has the interesting title, *Thank You for Being Late - An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*.

In it Friedman speaks about a ‘supernova’ of accelerated change centering around three exponential accelerations in three of the great forces in today’s world; the power of computers, market globalization, and climate change.

To give you an idea, he describes what would have happened to a car I once owned, a Volkswagen Beetle, if it had advanced as fast as computer chips have done since 1970. Had this happened, today’s version of my old VW would now be able to go at 300,000 miles per hour, (handy for those quick trips to California!), do 2 million miles to the gallon (good news for a careful Scotsman like myself!), and cost just 4 cents (even more so)! That is how fast computers have been advancing and continue to advance.

These forces - computing power, the market, and nature - are the tigers of our world and age. They are not good or evil, they just are. And yet, Jim Corbett’s story reminds us that these great tigers can become man-eaters. If they are damaged or twisted in some way, they can start devouring those that live on the edge of the jungle.

We are also conscious that, alongside the beasts that roam in the darkness unknowing and amoral, there is a deeper darkness. The deep night of human hatred and ideological fanaticism that we see tearing up lives and communities all across Europe and the Middle East and closer to home too. Tigers cannot be good or evil, but human beings can be. And you and I know only too well that our own hearts and lives are not immune to the cold dark night that seeps and creeps into our choices and our relationships.

So how do we live in a world like this? How do we live in a world where change spins round us like a perfect storm, where great forces seem to be offering such potential for good and yet such potential for harm? How do we live in a world of damaged man-eaters and damaged human hearts, all driven half mad by hurt and lies and bitterness and greed? How can we face these things? These tremendous forces seem so vast and powerful.

*“The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not.”*

Somehow, in this day of days, in this gathering around a stable door, in this gazing on the essentially human and the essentially divine we see a way.

In every storm there is an eye and for us, this is it. The eye in which we can see something even more powerful than the storm and the darkness that whirls ever faster around us.

God shows us that, against the darkest night, a tiny infant, a tiny spark of life and light, can and will prevail provided it has his will behind it.

Jim Corbett and his little dog step slowly off and disappear into the jungle to find and confront the all-powerful beast. And, of course, terrible and dangerous though it is, he shows that it is not all-powerful. A single man and small dog can find and kill it and restore the order to what it is meant to be - an order where the tigers roar, but do not devour men.

In the same way, Christians down the ages, including Christians who have worshipped and who still worship here, have looked at this holy child and realized that the power of the darkness and the power of the storm are not as powerful as they look. One man or woman may start a non-profit. One man or woman may champion a cause they believe in. One man or woman can step quietly into the jungle and hunt the beast that is devouring the people they serve. I could name many people that are doing just this, but I think it is better today that you think about such men and women you know yourself. Better that you realize you could do this too. We could do this too.

God has blessed us. Christ Church is entering its 200th year. We are looking at how we can be a light that shines in the darkness of our world today. Part of that is just being true to what we are and what the faith has been. It is not insignificant that so many gather, here in this church, to hear the timeless music of the Anglican tradition and to be part of the ancient movement of the liturgy that comes to us from the lives of people down the many ages. It is not surprising that there are growing numbers of young people coming here to this church. They are fully thrown into the storm of interconnectedness and change, but they find here, the eye of the storm, the stillness at the centre of things.

And so we kneel with the hearts of children before this great and sacred mystery. Thomas Friedman said that he rejected optimism and pessimism as just two types of fatalism - the one blindly hopes all will be well, the other always believing that any good thing will get screwed up. Instead, he talks about “applied hope,” and that is really what Christian faith is. We see the world as it is, but we apply the hope we have come to know in this holy child. This is what equips us to step into the storm and into the darkness without fear and in the expectation that one person can make a difference to the biggest tigers in our world.

May I wish you a joyful, still and happy Christmas and may we apply the hope we have beheld in this service in our lives and that of our world.