

The Octave Day of Christmas-Christmas 2

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." (Isaiah 9. 2)

The Prophet Isaiah, one of the greatest in Israel's history, spoke often of the coming of the Messiah. The people of Israel had suffered greatly due to their disobedience to God. They had been oppressed by conquerors and scattered as a people. But, as we see in today's Lesson, Isaiah gives them hope as he speaks of the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder. . . of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this.

Isaiah's words are a great outburst of rejoicing for us, as it was a great promise of hope for Israel. The yoke of oppression has been broken, and a child has been born to sit upon David's throne: a great statesman, a mighty warrior, a father to his people. The Prophet speaks of the Messiah's coming, in prophetic fashion, as though it had already happened and his soul is ecstatic with his vision of the Messiah's glory.

There has been, and there still is, a good deal of debate about the precise meaning of those ancient prophecies. But the New Testament is abundantly clear that they are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and that is the way in which Christian tradition has always understood them. The promised child is the child of Bethlehem, Emmanuel, God with us. He is the promised Messiah, and he sits upon David's throne as the Saviour of his people; and therefore his name is "Jesus," which means "Saviour of his people." (Matthew 1.21)

The prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. By his words and by his works he makes that claim. Remember the question of John the Baptist, when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Remember Jesus' answer: "Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see." (Luke 7.20, 22) By words and signs, he shows himself to be the Messiah, "He that should come."

Jesus fulfills the prophets. But in doing so, he also transforms them, and

gives them a deeper spiritual sense. He comes to restore the kingdom, no doubt, but the kingdom he restores is a kingdom of the spirit. He comes to break oppression, but the oppression which he breaks is not the oppression of Babylon or Rome. It is not the oppression of flesh and blood; it is the deeper, and altogether more hateful and devastating oppression of deceitful lusts and vain ambitions. The captivity from which he frees is the captivity of the confused and perverse human soul, the captivity of sin and hopelessness.

No doubt, all this sounds pretty obvious, and even platitudinous. And yet, it seems to me that these things must be said again, and thought about again. Multitudes of our contemporaries, even multitudes of Christians, live entirely in terms of worldly hopes. Some of them are, no doubt, noble and altruistic hopes: hopes for a better world, hopes for peace and prosperity for all, hopes for comfort and security. They are in some sense Messianic hopes, but their limit is the kingdoms of this world, and therefore their end is destruction and hopelessness. "Here we have no continuing city." (Hebrew 13.14)

This is the season of Saturnalia, the ancient pagan festival of the winter solstice: the Kalends of January, according to the Roman Calendar. On that festival the pagans celebrated the return of the sun, and the growing of the light. Our holy season of Christ's Nativity coincides with that pagan festival, and the coincidence of the symbolism is a wonderful thing. But what we celebrate is the rising of a better sun, and the growing of a light which shines unto life eternal.

The true Messiah comes to free us from all worldly limitation, to open to us an eternal Kingdom of the Spirit, which moth and rust cannot corrupt, and which no thief, except our own folly, can ever steal.

The Venerable Bede, an eighth-century English monk, in his Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, tells the story of the conversion to Christianity of Edwin, King of Northumbria. The story includes a debate in Witan, the King's palace, and one of the King's nobles makes this speech:

Such seemeth to me, my Lord, the present life of men here on earth (for the comparison of our uncertain time to live), as if a sparrow should come to

the house and very swiftly flit through; which entereth in at one window and straightway passeth out through another, while you sit at dinner with your captains and servants in winter-time; the parlour being then made warm with the fire kindled in the midst thereof, but all places abroad being troubled with raging tempests of winter rain and snow. Right for the time it be within the house, it feeleth no smart of the winter storm, but after a very short space of fair weather that lasteth but for a moment, it soon passeth again from winter to winter and escapeth your sight. So the life of man here appeareth for a little season, but what followeth or what hath gone before, that surely know we not. Wherefore if this new learning hath brought us any better surety, methink it is worthy to be followed.

The true Messiah comes, and he brings us a "new learning" and "better surety" of a kingdom not made with hands, but which is eternal in the heavens. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

Interestingly, our celebration of the Nativity of Christ coincides with the season of the winter solstice – that turning point of the year when the shortest and darkest day is left behind, and the hours of daylight steadily increase. The returning, or rebirth, of the sun has always been a cause of great rejoicing, and, all through human history, has given rise to all kinds of celebrations. In ancient pagan Rome, for instance, at this season, it was the great festival of *Sol Invictus*: the celebration of the unconquered sun. In a climate such as ours, it is perhaps easy to understand the motivation of such festivals; the growing hours of light remind us that even though the hardest part of winter still lies before us, we are surely on the road to spring.

The coincidence of Christmas with the winter solstice has given rise to much speculation and suspicion. Were the Christians just trying to divert people from those pagan revellings? Well, perhaps; but surely there is more to it than that, because the coincidence is full of profound symbolic significance, which is neither arbitrary nor accidental. In this, as in so many matters, the course of nature serves as a parable of spiritual truth: we celebrate the rising of a better sun; the growing of a light which all the darkness of this present world can never overcome, a light which shines to life eternal. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined".

That symbolism of light is fundamental in Holy Scriptures, from the beginning of the Book of Genesis. In the first instant of creation, God said, “Let there be light. And there was light” – not the natural light of the sun and moon and stars; they come later, on the fourth day – not the light of nature, but the spiritual light of God’s presence, God’s word, God’s will. The Scriptures begin with that light, and they conclude with that light: in the Book of Revelation, the holy city of St. John’s vision has no need of the sun, for the Lamb of God, God’s eternal Word, is the light which illumines it.

Thus, the Prophet, in today’s lesson, when he speaks of the coming of the light, is speaking of God’s presence with his people: the coming of the word of God to deliver those who dwell in darkness. Isaiah’s words still remain a great outburst of rejoicing. In his vision of the coming of the light, he sees the kingdom of Israel restored: a child is born to sit on David’s throne. “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder...of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this”.

The promised child is the child of Bethlehem, Emmanuel, God with us. He is God’s word made flesh – a light shining in the darkness, which the darkness cannot overcome. He is the promised Messiah, who sits on David’s throne as saviour of his people; and therefore his name is “Jesus”, which means just that: “Jehovah saves – God saves”. He comes as the light, as the rising of the sun, to illumine all the nations, and to be the glory of his people, Israel.

Thus the prophecies are fulfilled in him: but they are also transformed in his fulfilling of them. They are given a deeper spiritual sense. He comes to restore the kingdom, no doubt; but what is the Israel he restores? The new Israel is not the kingdom of an earthly territory; it is a kingdom of the spirit. He comes to break oppression; but the oppression which he breaks is not the oppression of Babylon or Rome; it is not the oppression of flesh and blood; it is the deeper, and altogether more hateful and devastating oppression of spiritual blindness, and deceitful lusts and vain ambitions. The captivity from which he liberates is the captivity of the confused and wayward human soul, the captivity of sin and hopelessness. The darkness he illumines is the

darkness of the human mind and heart. In the frozen darkness of our winter, he brings promise of a rebirth of the spirit.

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” That is the light of the glory of God’s eternal word. That is the light of the first day of creation, and that is the light which shines upon the heavenly Jerusalem. And that is the light which illumines the manger scene in Bethlehem, for there is the Word made flesh, and there we see, if we will only look, “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. May that light illumine the dark, cold stables of our hearts with promise of a new life.

As Robert Herrick puts it, in his lovely carol:

*Dark and dull night, fly hence away,
And give the honour to this day,
That sees December turn to May,
If we may ask the reason, say:
 We may see him come, and know him ours,
 Who with his sunshine and his showers,
 Turns all the patient ground to flowers.*

In today’s Gospel Lesson, we have St. Luke’s story of the shepherds, hastening to Bethlehem “to see the thing which is come to pass.” “And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”

The world was indeed astonished by the strange story the shepherds had to tell; but we, we who have worshipped at the manger, let us, with Mary, treasure these things, and ponder them in our hearts. Let that be the ground of our peace, and of our rejoicing, in this New Year.

Amen. +