

Christmas Eve 2018

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”

The time was roughly 700 B.C. and the people about which the Prophet Isaiah spoke lived in the northern region of Israel, which would later be called Galilee. They had fallen away from their covenant with God and were coming under foreign domination. Christians for 2,000 years have seen Isaiah’s words as a fully accomplished in the coming of Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.

The darkness Isaiah’s contemporaries walked in was spiritual. They had lost the sense of the meaning and purpose of their lives, the sense of God’s Presence, of being accountable to Him. But then so increasingly have we in our time. We are replacing the natural with the artificial, the real with the virtual. We turn away from right and wrong and prefer shades of gray. We are becoming extensions of the gadgets we make, which distract and entertain us and absorb increasing amounts of our time. We value competition over communion. We avoid moral issues except through politics perhaps because it seems less threatening but is actually more dangerous. We believe that bigger is always better, losing the individual and the unique. Compare this with what we learn in the Word of God:

You and I are created beings; we are not random events; we are created for a purpose. We have bodies but we also have souls. We have the intelligence to reason that a universe of this complexity cannot arise from itself. We intuit a Presence that transcends time and space. We long for this Presence but often mistakenly attach that longing to other things and people. From that Presence ultimately come any sense of good and evil, light and darkness. We are created male and female for sacrificial love, to transcend selfishness, to find meaning in the sacrifices we embrace and in dying bravely, reaching out in hope to that Presence with whom we seek the fullness of communion beyond this life.

The vision that Isaiah receives, the remedy for people walking in darkness, is straightforward. God’s remedy is a child: “a child is born to us, a son is given us”, the God-Hero, whose dominion will be vast and eternal, The Wonder-Counselor who sustains us by right judgment and justice. “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!” We are often ambivalent about God but He is not ambivalent about us!

“The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways...”

Now, fast-forward 700 years and we hear St. Paul writing to his fellow missionary, Titus, and describing the impact of the coming of Jesus the Son of God into our darkness. He says: “The grace of God has appeared.” Have you ever watched an eagle or a hawk or an osprey fly? These huge birds are sustained and soar by the powerful updrafts that fill their wings. Sustained by these updrafts, they glide and travel long distances without exhausting themselves! The grace of God can work like this in our lives. Compare this with the pigeon: flapping and flapping, but often barely rising above the ground. You and I cannot “live temperately, justly, and devoutly” in this darkened time for long without the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This grace can lift us and sustain us. A sign of God’s grace is the moment we find ourselves “eager to do what is good”. Our goal in life has changed!

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”

Now turn your attention to the stable in Bethlehem. There is Joseph the carpenter and Mary. They are the new Adam and Eve, surrounded by representatives of the animal kingdom, visited by shepherds, men who worked hard with their hands in all kinds of weather and dangers. These are not sentimental people. But, “the glory of the Lord shone around them”. They are as real as they can be. This a new creation powered by God’s grace!

At the very center is the Child: there is pure goodness, if you will. God the Son has come into our darkness to present us with a new possibility, a choice. Is goodness what we truly seek? Is the light what we want? Here it is! Or do we prefer the familiar confines of our darkness? The coming of the Son shines a light into our souls each year, like a search light. Christmas is many things, but above all, it lays bare the state and health of our soul. This Christmas is the perfect opportunity to say “yes” to the Son of God, who is God’s remedy to our darkness – to say “yes” not just tonight but tomorrow and every day!