

### Epiphany 3

Isaiah 9: 1-4; 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18; Matthew 4: 12-25.

Light will overcome the darkness

Rev. Helen Paget.

Our gospel quotes a section from our Isaiah reading, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light .....

But the darkness it is referring to is not physical darkness caused by a lack of light, but emotional darkness. The people of Israel were sad, dejected, they felt rejected, they were in exile, they had lost their home, they had lost their place of worship, they had lost their identity, they felt rejected and abandoned by God.

Most of us would struggle to understand the darkness felt by the Israelites, we have lived a reasonably comfortable and predictable life. We may have lived through hard times, world wars, floods, economic depression, drought, but our lives were, for the most part still relatively comfortable and stable. Most would struggle to understand the plight of the Israelites, but not all. Our Sudanese brothers and sisters would understand it all too well, it has happened to them, it is happening to them. They have lived in the 'land of deep darkness' they would understand this sense of communal defeat and despair felt by the people of Israel, this crisis which has left the entire community and country in a chronic state of shock. Many of them walked away from everything they knew and had, walked for weeks, months, walked toward the unknown in the hope of finding a safe place, a place from which they will no longer need to walk. Some did not survive the walk, some were born during the walk, and so started their lives in uncertainty, in a state of 'flux'.

For the Israelites, in the middle of their darkness, they received a bold promise; a 'great light' would come, and give them rest. This promise of light can be seen as a metaphor for God's saving acts toward the Israelites. The darkness endured for those endless weeks, months, years, would be dispelled by a light so bright it would blind them with its brilliance, they would be forced to squint, shield their eyes, even shy away from the light because of how bright it is. But soon their eyes would adjust, they would be able to see, and this time, they will really see. The heaviness they had felt would give way to lightness, levity, mirth. The promise of Yahweh through the prophet Isaiah is that no matter how heavy the darkness of defeat, humiliation and exile, the darkness is not the end. The light will overcome the darkness and never leave. The safe place created by the light will last, they will feel secure in this light, it will create for them a 'safe place'. We are given the same promise, no matter how heavy our personal darkness is, God brings new light and new joy to us.

While watching Deep Space Nine this week (Star Trek, for the uninitiated), I heard this interchange between a young cadet, serving on the Valiant and Jake (Captain Cisco's son) about the cadet's life at home, on the moon.

"You know, (she said) the sun only comes up once a month on the Moon, every lunar morning, my father and I would put on suits and hike out across the Sea of Clouds. .... Dawn is so shocking on the Moon. One minute you're in the darkest night you can imagine, and then in the next instant, the sun lifts up and this glorious, pure light just explodes across the surface. I felt like I met God every morning."

The Israelites were promised this 'lunar dawn' into each and every one of their lives. We too have that dawn offered in our lives, the light of God just explodes across the surface of our lives, and fills it with glorious pure light.. They, and we, are promised a new place, a safe place, where darkness will never overcome us.

So how does this new light fit in today's gospel? Jesus has left his home town and gone to a new home, Capernaum, a beautiful fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is the new light shining in the darkness. Jesus is offering, inviting people to see the new light. He continues John's proclamation of repentance. And repent is one of those words which we often misinterpret, or just understand wrongly. It simply means 'turn around', 'look in a different direction' 'have a new focus'. So his is just saying "Turn around, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". Jesus is inviting those around him to 'turn around', stop doing what you are doing and turn toward the Father, stop following your torturous regulations, and follow the path set before you by God. Come, follow me, I will take you to a new place, a safe place, a place where you will always be welcome, a place where you will always be at home. I will show you the way to the Father. Jesus was calling Peter and Andrew, and James and John, and everyone else who followed him to a place where they could find mercy, purpose, stability, forgiveness, security. And, we are told, they responded immediately. They saw and welcomed the light which swept over their lives.

What about us? Can we do the same? Peter and Andrew, James and John left their jobs, left their families, left the security of everything they knew and followed Jesus. Now it may well have been 'low season' for the fishing

industry, so there was not much to do but clean the nets and scrub the boats, but they left their fathers, their families, and in the time of Jesus that was a big deal. They responded immediately, they responded without a second thought. We know Andrew and Peter have seen Jesus at least once before this day, and it would be hard to say they actually 'know' him. Are we ready to respond the leadings of the spirit with as much speed, or does our modern thinking mean that we may well be ready to respond to such leadings, but we have to 'weigh up the costs', do a 'risk analysis' and then only if we like the look of the answers are we willing to go ahead with it. Well Jesus is telling us today, in our gospel, that the time to act is now, the risk analysis has good answers, the costs may be high, but they are worth it. The kingdom of God is at hand, the time to act is now. The moment is here. Opportunity awaits. Seize it. "The kingdom is near," Jesus said. Let us all be as willing to respond as quickly and eagerly as did the disciples.