

## Christmas I (31 December 2023)

“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... For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given... and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

+In the Name of...

I begin by apologizing, as this lesson was not read at this mass. It comes from Morning Prayer from both today and Christmas Day. The editors of the Prayer Book considered this passage so important, so integral to the Christmas message, that they thought it worthy of being included twice, just a few days apart.

In the opening line, “walked” is an idiom for having lived. Few of us ever experience real darkness in the physical sense. In our home, the nightlights usually outnumber the occupants. And that does not take into account the multitude of lights on outside

in the neighboring buildings and on the streets. I realize that not everyone is a city-dweller, but complete darkness is unusual.

Perhaps you have seen the movie, The Christmas Candle, based on a book by the same name, in which a vicar who has lost his faith after the death of his wife and daughter takes a call in a small town where the locals believe an angel visits the townspeople once every 25 years and grants the wish of the one person who receives the “Christmas candle” from the local candle maker. The film is placed at the dawn of the electric light bulb, and also in a poverty-stricken, out-of-the-way place, so these people know darkness in both the physical and spiritual sense.

The hearers of Isaiah could also relate to this darkness in both forms. Of course, they were thousands of years before the advent of the electric light bulb, but more importantly, they lived in a time of great spiritual darkness. In the time of Isaiah, the Jewish people had been driven from their homeland of Judah after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. These people

had had it all: they lived in the Promised Land to which God had led them. He richly blessed them in return for their loyalty and obedience. In short, they had it all, but it was not good enough. Does that sound like any other societies in the history of the world? At times we have spoken of geographic places as being dark: darkest Africa or darkest Peru. It should be apparent to us that darkness is no longer confined to geographic locations, if it ever was. In every country of the world, every municipality, every neighborhood, there are those who live in darkness.

The problem we face today is that our society does not believe we are in darkness. We differ from the Jewish people in the time of Isaiah because they knew they needed the Messiah, and they waited for him with eagerness. After the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, the Jewish people began to return to Judah. They knew they had given up something wonderful and wished to return to where they thought the Messiah would come. So the Jews driven from Judah

had *almost* everything: they were missing the Savior. We really do have everything, including the Savior but our society is not interested in Him or anything he has to offer. That's not entirely true: we like His teaching on love, so long as that is defined as letting everyone do what he wants. I saw a comic recently which showed Santa Claus lamenting the fact that he had given up keeping a list of who is naughty and nice because no one can agree on what constitutes "naughty" anymore. What a sad state of affairs when political correctness has even invaded the North Pole. When we remove God from our foundation, that foundation crumbles, and so what standard will we use to judge moral behavior? Perhaps we are entering a new "Dark Age".

Isaiah goes on to say that this Messiah will break the "yoke of his burden" and "the rod of his oppressor". Like darkness, true oppression is hard for us to imagine. I am not claiming that we do not have our fair share of trial and tribulations, but it is not the same as the generations of Jewish people who found themselves

under the oppressive rule of foreign governments. There was no chance to “make things right” in the next election four years off. You can understand why the Jewish people looked for a political liberator as well as a spiritual liberator. While we can all name some aspect of our government with which we are unhappy, and consequently a politician or two from whom we wish to be “liberated”, we have not had our homeland destroyed and been driven to a foreign land.

Isaiah promises the end of war. Our exposure to war now is completely different than that of the Jewish people. In some ways, we are exposed to war so much it has lost any meaning: I learned Middle Eastern geography by watching the evening news: Coverage of the Iran-Contra Scandal taught me where Iran and Nicaragua were. Coverage of Desert Shield and Storm taught me where Iraq and Kuwait were. Coverage of the Battle of Mogadishu taught me where Somalia was. Yet these reports are sterile. We are so far removed from the blood and gore of battle that it is all

too easy to think of it as fiction. This was not the case for the Jewish people, who had been fighting invaders for generations. Isaiah's description of garments soaked in blood from hand-to-hand combat defies our imagination.

It is easy to get discouraged by Isaiah's words, but he quickly tells what is to come: "For, unto us a child is born..." For me, it is hard to listen to this section without hearing strains of Handel, but try to focus on what the Jewish people would have heard: a child? Ask any parent – parenthood is hardly a liberating experience! But the government will be upon his shoulder. He will bear the burden of all authority; authority will rest in Him. "Wonderful counselor" implies that He will possess God-given counsel. He will have all of the wisdom of Solomon, but, according to the next line, will also be the Mighty God. Earlier in the book of Isaiah, the coming One was called Emanuel, God with us. This verse makes that statement even more poignant.

He will also be an everlasting Father. Unlike a mortal king, whether good or bad, who established his reign only temporarily until his death, this king is around to stay. There will be no end to His government and peace. This Messiah will have the authority to see that His peace spreads throughout the world into the deepest, darkest places - the hearts of unwilling, uncooperative, arrogant human beings. Some people imagine God up in Heaven somewhere watching human beings, and as they die, passing judgment based on some technicality: "You tried hard, but ha-ha, I tricked you with that one. Off to hell with you!" But it's really just the opposite: God wants everyone to come to Him, to know Him and to love Him. That is why He sent this babe in the manger, this Saviour of the World for all to see, as plain as well, as plain as a babe in a manger. Nothing convoluted about that! We are the ones who obfuscate the issue by trying to justify our decisions not to follow Him.

We as human beings have to be willing to let go of our darkness. That little portion of our lives that we don't want anyone to see, even God. Of course, this is silly because God knows everything. Maybe we think He's too busy to notice. But notice He does.

I have good news: despite the beautiful blue spruce I saw on the side of the road yesterday, today is only the seventh day of Christmas! I am not interested in whether you get your golden rings confused with your French hens, but another line of an equally famous Christmas carol does come to mind: "Let every heart, prepare Him room." Let us give Him all the room He needs to light up our neighborhood and our city. "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light... upon them hath the light shined." Lord, let thy light shine upon us, that we might reflect it, and Thee, in all that we say and do.

+In the Name...