

Brought to Light

A sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12 & Matthew 2:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 January 2023

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Message

In Jesus, the truth about God's ways and means is brought to light and we are called to so reflect that light that all might be drawn to it.

Sermon

Light and darkness are one of the most powerful pairs of symbols in almost any language and culture. We have lots of sayings that employ these symbols. There are “dark days” indeed; we are “kept in the dark”; we suffer “dark nights of the soul”. And sometimes something hidden is “brought to light”, or a light is shone on it, or maybe after a time of doubt and confusion you have one of those moments where suddenly “the lights go on” for you. For Buddhists, the moment of conversion is called “enlightenment”, and in our Christian tradition, especially in the Eastern churches, it has been called “illumination”.

These symbols seem to need no explanation because they are somehow written into our human psyche from birth. In childhood, many of us were afraid of the dark. I've never heard of a child being afraid of the light, although I do know of some business tycoons and politicians who are afraid of the light. The fact that we can move back and forth so easily between the literal meaning of the word light and the metaphorical meaning, almost without noticing, shows how naturally these symbols work for us.

Tonight we gather to celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, and you could define the word “epiphany” as an enlightenment, or an illumination, or a moment where the lights go on. And so the readings we have heard read are full of images of light breaking through the darkness.

The symbol of the star, so central to the story of the magi visiting the infant Jesus, is a symbol of a bright light that shines in the darkness of the night sky and draws strangers to the place of enlightenment, of epiphany. The prophesy from Isaiah develops the image at length after opening with the words, “Arise, shine; for your light has come.” Light has come to us, and for us, and now we are to shine, to reflect that light. And the Apostle, in the reading from the letter to the Ephesians, speaks of “bringing to light” the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

The particular focus for both Paul and Isaiah is on the drawing of the gentiles into the light of God previously made known to Israel. The story of the journey of the magi to visit Jesus depicts this, and Matthew alludes to the Isaiah passage as he tells it by repeating Isaiah's image of the gifts of gold and frankincense being brought from far off nations.

But for us gathered here all these years later, the idea that the God of Israel is now the God of the gentiles too is not a shocking new revelation. We kind of take it for granted. Especially since we are gentiles. So what does the Epiphany mean now? Is there anything new still being brought to light, or is it all past history now?

Well, it seems to me that there is something else important that underpins what Paul and Isaiah were talking about, and which continues to be an ongoing source of epiphany in our

day. You see, the real issue was not just who does this God accept and welcome, but what kind of God is this? How does this God operate? What are the ways and means by which this God deals with the world and its peoples? And when the answers to these questions come to light, they still take us by surprise and leave us struggling to work out how to live them out in practice. There are at least two aspects of this that come to light in the readings we've heard tonight.

The first is the extension of the image of God drawing the gentiles to the light, and that is that God is not on about dividing us all up into insiders and outsiders, clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, acceptable and unacceptable. We might think that this is yesterday's news with regard to the gentiles, but we just keep coming up against it again and again because it is part of our fundamental human condition to think in such divisive categories. No sooner have we let go of one old antagonism, but our darkness mutates and turns us against some other group.

If it's not gentiles it's black people, or it's Asians, or it's women, or it's queue-jumping refugees, or it's homosexuals, or it's Muslims, or it's unreconstructed men, or Trump supporters, or homophobic conservatives. Again and again we divide ourselves up into us and them, and "us" is okay so long as we protect ourselves against "them" because "they" are a threat to everything we hold dear and the source of all that is corrupt and degenerate.

But God will have none of it, and when the first people to recognise Jesus for who he really is are pagan astrologers from the vicinity of Iraq, you know that God is not going to respect any of our categories of who does and doesn't belong. Wherever the darkness of our prejudice and divisiveness settles, the light of God's love bursts forth and we have to either welcome it and embrace it, or go scuttling off for more darkness to hide ourselves in.

The second way in which new things are being brought to light constantly is the never-ending surprise of the humility and vulnerability of the ways and means by which God operates. We keep wanting and expecting God to act in big powerful ways that no opposition on earth can resist. Even when we try to find words to define God, we begin with things like omnipotent and almighty. We want a God who deals with evil with an iron fist (so long as it's not our evil), and who wipes away the oppressors and deals out justice for all.

This, of course, links back to my previous point, because in this desire we are again dividing the world up into goodies – us – and baddies – them – and expecting God to endorse our divisions and anoint us as the iron fist of justice. The magi themselves were no doubt expecting to see a vision of power and wealth and influence. Where did they go first seeking the newborn messiah? The Palace. Of course. That's where rulers are born. That's where God would appear, surely?

But God upturned their expectations, and brought a surprising truth to light. God continually does it again. We expect an avenging warrior God, but we get a vulnerable refugee baby. We expect surroundings of wealth and influence, but we get simplicity and homelessness. We expect the religiously orthodox to recognise and honour his arrival, but instead we see only pagan outsiders and despised nobodies. We expect a mighty triumph, but instead we get a crucified victim.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come.” This epiphany goes on and on. We are continually surprised and even disturbed as God’s ways and means are brought to light.

Over and over we look for one thing, even cry out and plead for it, but we get another. In Jesus, hunted at birth and humiliated at death, God’s ways and means are shockingly brought to light. Love and mercy and consolation seemed like a welcome idea when God was dealing with “us”, but when God is dealing with “them”, we wanted a God of judgement and vengeance and righteous anger.

But as the light comes and makes known to us the God who is, we are called to respond. “Arise, shine; for your light has come.” As we are drawn to the light and kneel before this epiphany of God’s vulnerable love and grace, we are called to arise and shine; to shine forth this revelation in our own lives.

Having received the gift of an epiphany, we are called to be an epiphany. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”