

Epiphany
3/1/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 60:1 – 6

Psalms 72

Ephesians 3:1 - 12

Matthew 2:1 - 12

The coming of the Light that enlightens all

Arise, shine, your light has come... Epiphany is the end of Christmas, but it does not conclude with something fixed or all wrapped up. It ends with the introduction of a new openness about God. The great theme the prophet Isaiah celebrates in the second part of his writing (Ch 40 – 55) and which we have touched on through this period, is the joyful anticipation of the exiles' return from Babylon to Palestine, an event in history in which he sees the saving hand of God at work. *Arise, shine, your light has come...* The first words of chapter 60 seem to continue the theme but there is a difference. The prophet has moved beyond the historical event that earlier captured his attention to focus on a new act of salvation in the future. If Isaiah had a vested interest in the return to Jerusalem, he is able to forgo that idea for something that stretches him, and his audience, much further. The light of God will rise to shine on Jerusalem, and the nations will flow towards that holy light, as moths are attracted to a lamp. The image of a motley crew of exiles limping across the desert is replaced with a flood of people from all nations. God's Light shining forth from Jerusalem is a divine gift that will come to have value and meaning for the rest of the world. Out of the thick darkness in which they dwell, the peoples of the world will come in droves from remote places in order to worship and rejoice greatly in the reality of the light, bringing gifts in homage to God. If the return of the people of Judah to Jerusalem demonstrated the hand of God at work in the world, Isaiah now offers us something much grander, far more inclusive, and reflective of a much bigger idea of God. But in moving to a new or bigger screen Isaiah does not leave behind the little and the lost. The gift of God's presence that shines from Jerusalem is a gift for all the people of the entire world.

The New Testament takes us this theme. Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles the embodiment of the belief that what God has to give is for all, not just for some. And Matthew's announcement about the star that drew foreigners to pay homage at Bethlehem, relates directly to the inclusive vision found in Isaiah. In this birth at Bethlehem the light, which touches all people, was found to shine. The Magi were keepers of different sorts of wisdom to that found in Israel: Astrology, Astronomy the interpretation of dreams, and the like. On the basis of what they knew, they undertook a long difficult search for the one whose birth it heralded. That they are foreigners and do not belong to the faith of Israel is a radical statement about the kind of sovereignty that pertains to the Light that shines in this story. And when the Magi bring forth their gifts for the Christ child, Matthew intends us to see that here, in keeping with Isaiah's vision, the world has come with its gifts, not to bolster the coffers of Jerusalem, but to pay homage to the light of life.

The second part of Matthew's story exposes the underbelly of the legitimate powers. Herod, whom the Magi unwittingly tip off about Jesus is filled with fear, suspicion and false piety. He consults his own advisors while at the same time plotting to rid himself of one whom he believes to be his rival. Empire will always have trouble with the kind of sovereignty manifest in the light, and Jerusalem, the seat of power, rejects him more than once. There is a sign of hope in the frustration of Herod's evil plans. In a world as damaged and broken as ours is there is some hope in seeing that the power of darkness is frustrated where people remain responsive to the Light.

Then there is the question of Herod's advisors, the chief priests and scribes. They were people of the Word/Light who knew the answers. At one level their knowledge was ahead of that of the Magi. But while they had the Word, they lacked any ability to perceive and respond to what God was doing around them. Able to talk about the Light and understand where it will shine, they were not living in the expectation of the Light being a real presence for them.

As church people it is important to see these things. Here were people whose ambition to cut a figure with the Emperor and provide him with the answers he wanted overtook their commitment to live by faith. Such is the peril for all in the church who would think to advise the Empire in its affairs. Having faith and speaking the truth may not be the same as saying what the Emperor wants to hear. Whereas the Magi had come from deep darkness to worship in the light, Matthew's point is the priests of Israel have the Word of God but are effectively living in the dark. It is the pagan foreigners who are receptive and venture beyond their known world to honour God. This is humbling and challenging for all good, God fearing church people to hear because it means there is a difference between knowing the promises of God and responding to them in faith. And in a world where interfaith dialogue is ever more on the agenda, it behoves us to approach contact with our neighbours in faith with some self-reflection and humility.

Matthew witnesses to Light, which has the power to shame ecclesiastical authority and overturn imperial designs. Isaiah speaks of a light, which has the power to turn mourning into joy. The light spoken of here has sovereignty like no other. It offers us a hope, which transcends every form of darkness we know, and challenges every form of despair and injustice that exists in the world. But above all, we are not the keepers of this light; it keeps us because in it we find our source of hope.

Arise, shine; your light has come! As we watch our version of Herod's antics in the world today and ponder what 2010 might have in store for us, it is good to remember where the call to rise and shine comes from. Leaders will come and go. Imperial powers will have their plans. Churches will rise and fall, but the Light which enlightens all people will continue to shine, to announce its presence, and to call those who will respond to walk towards this radiance, and in so doing allow its goodness to fall on them, and reflect to others. In this strength may the darkness, which has been overcome, be seen to be overcome, in the year ahead: Thanks be to God.
