

Epiphany
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Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 60: 1 - 6

Psalms 72

Ephesians 3:1 - 12

Matthew 2:1-12

Arise, shine; your light has come!

In the lead up to Christmas we tend to hear a lot from the middle chapters of Isaiah where a dominant theme is that God is revealed in the return home of the Exiles from Babylon. When freedom came, they had more of a struggle than expected and they were despondent. But in the later Chapters of Isaiah a new tone emerges and a brilliant end-time vision is proclaimed. The words: *Arise, shine; your light has come!* is an announcement, and a summons. God himself will come to Israel, pictured as the arising of a great light that illuminates Jerusalem. The people, who thought they had been abandoned, are summoned to cease their mourning and despair. They are called to live in joyful well-being, focussed on the light because its coming means God is powerfully present to the people. The root of the word Epiphany refers to the breaking forth of light, as in the coming of the dawn, and that is exactly what is pictured here. But the light that falls on Jerusalem is not self-generated. It comes as a transforming and transfiguring gift from God.

There is an announcement, and there is a summons. The light has arisen, and Jerusalem is called to reorient itself to this light and to radiate its glow in the world. It is to unbend, look up, and behold a sight it could never have imagined. The light that has broken forth is attractive, drawing nations and kings towards it, as if to the brightness of a dawn. Waves of people move in Israel's direction bringing Jerusalem's children, people who have been living in exile or diaspora in the world. The nations bring their wealth to the holy city. There are animals for sacrifice and rich and exotic gifts and treasures. In a time of deep despondency the prophet declares that the favour of God shines upon the people, calling them to emerge from insignificance into fullness of life, and setting in train the pilgrimage of nations who come with gifts, not to prosper Jerusalem economically, but to worship God.

When we think about mission we usually think of centrifugal energy which moves out from here to do things for others. Another pattern, strongly detectable in the Hebrew Scriptures, and also present in the New Testament, is of God who works centripetally, gathering the world together by means of attractive, beckoning light shining from a city, in which all people find themselves beloved and at home. Jerusalem is a metaphor for the state of being in which God's presence, radiated through the holy people, causes lawlessness and social oppression to cease. Where Peace in the deepest sense of that word, reigns. Where righteousness is the governor, and days of mourning will be ended. *Arise, shine; your light has come!* is Isaiah's call to damaged Jerusalem out of which God creates a vision of newness for the whole world to share, in which every form of darkness is overcome. This is what is meant by salvation. The people of God are called to live in this hope empowered to contradict all the forms of darkness they encounter.

The star that settles over Bethlehem and draws foreigners to honour Jesus relates directly to the inclusive vision found in Isaiah. Matthew proclaims that in the birth of a child in Bethlehem the light of God that touches all people was found to shine. The sign of this is the Magi: foreigners who come to worship. The interesting thing about the Magi is that they were not people of the Scriptures. They were keepers of different sorts of wisdom; Astrology, the interpretation of dreams, and the like. Their understanding of the Star led them to persist in a long a difficult search for the one whose birth it heralded. That they were foreigners and did not belong to the faith of Israel is a radical statement about the kind of sovereignty that pertains to the Light of God. When they bring forth their gifts for the Christ child, Matthew intends us to see that, in keeping with Isaiah's vision, the world has come with its gifts to worship the presence of God.

It is said that when a light shines, it exposes the darkness. The coming of the light exposes two kinds relationships in those it touches. The first is the relationship of the incarnate one with worldly power. The Magi consult Herod and unwittingly tip him off about Jesus. News of a potential rival fills Herod with fear and suspicion. He fakes sanctity and consults his own advisors while at the same time plotting to rid himself of his rival. But Herod's evil plans are frustrated. In a world as damaged and broken as ours is there is some hope in seeing that where people remain responsive to the Light the power of darkness is frustrated.

The second relationship is that of the incarnate one with the religious authorities: Herod's advisors, the chief priests and scribes. They were people of the Word who are able to show that they know where the birth will take place. At an intellectual level, their knowledge is ahead of that of the Magi. What they lack is discernment and spontaneity: the ability to perceive and respond to what God is doing around them. Able to talk about the Light and understand where it will shine, they are not focussed on what the light is doing. They are too keen on providing Herod with the answers he wants. Matthew's point is that the priests of Israel have the Word of God but are really 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.

Isaiah shows the arising of a light that turns mourning into joy. Matthew shows light that has the power to shame ecclesiastical authority and overturn imperial designs. The light that shines here reveals a sovereignty like no other. It offers us a hope that transcends every form of darkness we know, and challenges every form of despair and injustice that exists in the world.

We are not the keepers of this light; it keeps us because in it we find our source of hope. Faced as we are with so many problems in church and society, the only way to live is to keep focussed on this light, for this is where hope comes from, even when everything else seems lost. And this hope comes, not as something we thought up, but as a gift. Given that we might live in freedom and responsiveness. Focussed not on our needs, but on the goodness of the one who created us to live in true community with each other.

Arise, shine; your light has come! As we watch modern versions of Herod's antics in the world today. As we ponder what might happen on the world stage as important leaders die. And as we are assaulted by the voices of those who see no future for the church or faith, it is good to remember where the call to arise and shine comes from. Modern day Herod's will have their plans, as imperial powers always have. Leaders will come and go. Churches will rise and fall, but the Light that enlightens all people will continue to shine, to announce its presence, and to call those who will respond to radiate this light to others. That way, for those who will recognize it, the darkness, which has been overcome will be seen to be overcome, by the power and the grace of God.
