

### ***The Darkness Within***

In the name of him who is the Light shining in this world's dark places, dear friends in Christ: Among the major themes of the season of Epiphany is the light of Christ shining out from its place of origin in a Bethlehem stable in successively larger circles until it reaches out to the heathen nations, and how it draws people from every land and race into the fellowship of God that was once pretty much the exclusive privilege of his chosen people Israel. We see this already with the wise men who come from far off Babylon. They are Gentiles drawn to worship the Christ Child whom they recognize as the long-promised king of the Jews. But these foreigners have, by God's grace, been led to understand that even though they are not Jews themselves, this is their King too. And indeed, he is: though God worked his plan of salvation in Christ Jesus through one chosen nation, he intended all along for this salvation to reach the ends of the earth. And so consistent with this theme, one of the things that really gets stressed this time of year is the importance of foreign missions and how we should all be playing a part in the vital task of taking the Gospel to all those far away nooks and crannies of the globe where people have yet to hear of God's love in sending his Son to be our Savior from sin. It's a crucial task for us because as yet unsaved souls depend on it. And so, it's right that we devote our attention to missions on a regular basis and especially now in Epiphany.

But in studying today's lessons I have to admit that I had something of an Epiphany myself. It happened as I was pondering the phrase "land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali ...Galilee of the Gentiles" that appears in two of today's readings. I've probably read it a hundred times before without really thinking about it—but this time around a light went on. It's this: that phrase would not have made any sense to Isaiah's original hearers. Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes of Israel. They were two tribes given as their lasting inheritance the land around the Sea of Galilee. The point is that these lands weren't "of the Gentiles"; it was home turf. It was part of the Promised Land. And the inhabitants there weren't benighted pagans lacking the dimmest glimmer of God's truth; they were Children of Israel who had full possession of the Word and promises of God. So if someone had looked over the prophet's shoulder and read what he wrote while the ink was still drying he would have said, "Isaiah, what are you talking about? What's this 'Galilee of the Gentiles' and 'people sitting in darkness'? How dare you even think such a thing! It's insulting to all God's people who live there. I think you need restudy your geography and your history because this is just wrong."

And it would have been at the time. But under the inspiration of the Spirit Isaiah was writing about a time in the future when unfortunately, his bleak description would fit these lands only too well. That is to say places once bathed in God's holy light and inhabited by his faithful people were going to be overshadowed with gloom and populated by unbelievers and the adherents of false religions. As it turns out, it didn't take very long for this particular prophecy to be fulfilled. Already in Isaiah's lifetime the lands he spoke of were conquered by the invading armies of Assyria. Large numbers of the inhabitants were killed or sold into slavery. Many others were moved and resettled in other areas of the Assyrian Empire. Meanwhile groups of other conquered peoples – Gentiles – were moved in and settled around the Sea of Galilee. And so, the result,

some seven hundred years later when Jesus begins his ministry, is that the whole place was a mishmash of mixed peoples and mixed up faiths.

And this we see is where Jesus chooses to launch his ministry. This is where he begins his campaign to bring light to those dwelling in darkness; not in far flung mission fields where the Word of God has never penetrated, but rather where darkness has encroached upon and overcome God's chosen people in the Promised Land. Jesus begins his teaching and preaching in places that once had the Word of God and then lost it in whole or in part on account of their unfaithfulness, or their apathy, or their wandering from the truth, or their being seduced by sin, or their being deceived by the philosophies of the world, or their making compromises and concessions with false religions, blending various pagan elements and ideas with the truth of God. It was all going on there in Galilee.

And the reason that this is significant for us is because of our understanding that what was once the land of Israel is always a prophetic picture of the New Testament Church. That is, Israel of old finds its present fulfillment and manifestation today in what we recognize as the Church of Jesus Christ. And if you think about it, you'll see that the description I gave of how spiritual affairs were all mixed up in Galilee at the time of Jesus fits perfectly the state of the greater Christian Church today. I mean what could be more messed up? Here the Church is divided into literally thousands of different denominations and sects that all claim to have the whole truth and yet at the same time all hold beliefs that flatly contradict things taught by the other churches. As a matter of fact you could take any biblical article of faith that we hold to be absolutely true, even very fundamental things like the deity of Jesus, his virgin birth, the miracles he performed, his sacrificial death for sin, and his bodily resurrection, to name but a few of the nuts and bolts basics, and I could point you to a church body that calls itself Christian where that truth is denied. And mind you, I'm talking about what the churches teach – what their official doctrine is – not necessarily what people within the churches believe. Only the Lord knows what individual members actually believe—for better or for worse.

And things have got this way because wherever the truth is, it comes under attack. Be it through the intrusion of the world and its ideas, the deceptions of the devil, or our own sinful tendency to wander away from God, darkness is always trying to overcome the light. And it doesn't usually come neatly packaged with a warning label that says "Danger: Darkness ahead. This is spiritual poison. Ingestion may cause loss of spiritual sight and sound judgment and may lead to everlasting death." Would that it were so simple; but no, it comes subtly with reasonable arguments, sweet temptations, and what appears to be wisdom and virtue. It comes concealed in the best of intentions. The shadows of darkness usually creep up slowly; but when they've done their work, they leave people in the dark. And the thing of it is, people in the dark can't see – they've lost their sense of spiritual sight – so they don't know that they're in the dark. They may even come to the point that they deny that the darkness exists at all.

Let me give you a couple examples of what I'm talking about, one that's local and another with much broader impact. And let me say in advance to anyone who may be offended that that's not my objective here. But it is my job to declare the whole counsel of God even when it hurts to hear it. Anyway, an article appeared in the Clarinda paper this last week in which one of the local pastors wrote about praying for unity in the Christian Church. "Well, that's a good thing to pray for", I thought. But in reading the rest of the article, it became clear that the kind of unity he was talking about wasn't

Christian unity at all. He wrote, "I used to believe that the division of Christianity into so many denominations ... was a bad thing. Experience and aging have changed my mind. There's no reason for all of us to worship alike, to sing alike, to govern ourselves alike, or [and here's the kicker] *even to interpret the Bible alike.*" Now, on the surface that sounds pretty good. It has a very nice appeal. It's very egalitarian and democratic and nonjudgmental – so it has all the politically correct attributes we crave. But it's exactly the opposite of what St. Paul says in this morning's Epistle lesson. There he deplores division in the Church. There he calls the members of the church to agree in the truth and not to be divided. Specifically, he calls them to have the same mind and same judgment in theological matters. There is only one Christ and only one truth about him, and it's confessing this one truth that unites people in Christ. The kind of unity the pastor was writing about is the kind that pleasantly agrees to disagree, which is nothing more than a way of saying that when all is said and done the truth of God – that is, *the light* – doesn't matter. All that's important is that we try to get along together—even if it means just holding hands in the dark. For goodness sake, that kind of unity I could have with my neighbor who's an atheist or a Wiccan or even a full-fledge Satanist.

Which, by the way and leading to my second example, is usually where this sort of thinking eventually takes you. I mean, if differences of faith within what calls itself the Christian church don't matter, if any one interpretation of Scripture is just as good as any other even when they are diametrically opposed, then there really is no such thing as God's revealed truth – or if there is, it cannot possibly be known. Either way, if no one can say for sure what a Christian should believe in order to be saved, why draw the boundary line at the edge of Christianity? Why not say that every religious idea is just as valid as any other? And why not say that in the end everyone will be saved?

This teaching is called *universalism*. It says that since God is at heart basically a nice guy, in the end he's going to take everyone to heaven regardless of their faith. And it may surprise you to know that in the past several weeks I have heard radio broadcasts or read articles by leading spokesmen of a number of mainline protestant denominations that we would call Christian and also one from that well-known great big non-protestant denomination headquartered in Rome that we would also call Christian that said exactly that: in the end everyone goes to heaven. No exceptions. And I don't know how else to say this: these are people speaking within the Church of Christ who are claiming that there is no such thing as darkness. The irony of it is that in several articles the same people who were teaching universalism were complaining about how people were leaving their churches in droves – not to join other churches, but just to stay home. You'd think they'd be happy with that; but no. First, they tell people that they don't have to believe anything in particular to be saved, and then they get all bent out of shape when people act like they believe what they were told. C'mon: if the church hasn't got something to say that I need to hear, why not stay home?

How very different though is the example we have before us in today's Gospel reading in which Jesus goes into spiritually darkened "Galilee of the Gentiles" where we hear that people are living in the shadow of death, and there he proclaims the message of repentance and faith in his Gospel. And it's interesting to me that he goes specifically to the synagogues where people are meeting for worship – that's where the darkness is within the Church. And that's where Jesus first shines the light of God's truth. That is his first priority: to illumine the hearts and minds of those who are already in the Church.

And the same is true today. The first priority of Jesus is to speak to his Church. And to the degree that in any church building or denomination his Word is being heard and expounded upon in truthfulness – without denying, degrading, or attempting to explain it away – there Jesus is bringing his light to those who are sitting in darkness. For we all have some of the darkness within. We all have sin. We all have doubt and unbelief. And to various degrees we all deceived by the world and the devil. Which is precisely why we need the light of Christ and his truth to shine on that darkness within; so that we can identify it, confess it, and allow him to drive it away with his blood bought forgiveness and replace it with his wisdom and truth.

Okay, shifting gears here a bit, there is in our synod a standing argument between two extremes. On one hand you've got those who are fanatic about missions. They say, "Let's not worry so much about having our doctrine straight. Let's put all our effort into making converts for Christ. That's the only thing that matters." Opposing them on the opposite end are those who are fanatic about making sure everyone already in the church is properly trained and comes to full maturity in the faith. They act like they won't be happy until every member has a master's degree in theology, and they sort of leave missions to take care of themselves. Anyway, the two sides are constantly at each other. The missions side accuses the other of not caring about the lost, and the doctrine side accuses the mission folks about not caring about the truth.

Fortunately, we who are not on the fanatic fringe recognize that it's a false dichotomy. It's not like we have to choose between doing one or the other. Obviously, a healthy church will be doing both: bringing more of the light of Christ to those already in the church so that they can continue to grow in Christian faith and life and at the same time reaching out to those who have yet to receive the Good News. But let me suggest that even though we don't want to choose one or the other, we can see in today's lesson a priority. Jesus goes first to the Church. There he speaks to his people to confront and drive away the darkness in them. And it makes sense: we're not going to be effective as fishers of men if our own vessel is in disorder and our nets need mending. And it will do no good to make converts if we haven't got a firmly grounded and nurturing church for them to continue to grow in.

So, what I'm saying is let's make Jesus' top priority ours as well. Let's keep meeting with him here so that he will continue to bring us the light of his truth to overcome the darkness within. In that way he will make us to be his lamps that shine his light brightly before the world. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***