

10th January 2021  
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Sunday after Theophany

*'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'*

On this Sunday after the great feast of Theophany our attention is drawn to what happens afterwards. The radically reforming preaching of the Forerunner and Baptist, John, lands him in the prison of the Tetrarch, Herod Antipas. Our Lord, meanwhile, moves up north, into the region of Galilee; *Galilee of the Gentiles*, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, quoted in today's gospel.

The Galilee was indeed an area occupied by Gentile as well as Jews; there were many people of mixed race and many of the gentiles had converted to Judaism during the time of the Maccabean revolt about one-hundred-and-sixty years before Christ was born. The Jews of Judea regarded them as rather second-class Jews, noting that they had been heavily influenced by Greek culture. Think, for example, of how many of Christ's disciples had Greek as well as Hebrew names.

This is, no doubt, good, old-fashioned, binary thinking which we human beings love to do: them-and-us; the other; the in-crowd and the outsiders. Perhaps the pious Jews to the South thought of the Galileans in much the same way as those nineteenth century missionaries from Britain could think of a whole continent as *Darkest Africa*. So, for St Matthew the evangelist, this land of Zebulon and Naphtali represents a darkness into which the light of Christ has come.

But we cannot be complacent: this idea of a light in the darkness is not included by St Matthew as only a reference to these specific events, or to this particular part of ancient Israel in the Roman provinces. Christ may well have appeared to save the Jews first, for they were the children of Abraham and the inheritors of the promises. Remember what he said to the Canaanite woman, *'I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'* [Matt.15:24] But

Matthew makes clear at the end of his gospel that it was in Galilee that the risen Christ commissioned his apostles to enlighten and make disciples of *all* nations. I know this because we read the end of Matthew's gospel at every Baptism, and I read or heard that passage fifty-one times last year!

But what exactly is this *darkness*? In short, it is life without God, the source of Life. For the gentiles it means the ignorance of the True and Living God; the darkness of paganism, that is, religion locked into the natural human experience of this world. And even for the Jews who had inherited the revelation of The Law, St Paul says, '*Their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read.*' [2 Cor.3:14] Even they, in part, were in darkness.

It would be tempting for us, like those Jews of Judea, to see the darkness only in others; They might well have thought that possessing the law of Moses, and a pure bloodline from the tribe of Judah, they themselves would be full of light. But eventually, Christ came to Jerusalem as well, and proclaimed that even they needed to repent and know that the kingdom was at hand. And what of us, the great body of the Orthodox? We know, of course, that having been baptised, and possessing the Orthodox faith, we are enlightened; as we sing at the end of every Liturgy: *We have seen the true light! We have received the heavenly Spirit! We have found the true Faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity, for He has saved us.*

Yes, this is true of all of us, *generally*; it is true of the one, right believing and universal Church of Jesus Christ. But when it comes to any darkness, any sin, and any alienation from God and from one another, we are on our own, alone in the dark. As Christ Himself says in the parable of the Narrow Gate, '*You will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.'* But He will say, '*I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.*' [Lk.13:26-27]

As ever, the gospel of Christ commands us to fight a spiritual warfare on two fronts: firstly, confronting our own inner blindness, our very own darkness: '*How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let*

*me remove the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the plank that is in your own eye?' [Lk.6:42] This is where we start; this is for us the beginning of the ascetic way, the entry through the narrow gate.*

But we are also called to lighten the darkness in those for whom just living is an involuntary and physical struggle. As Christ says of those who help the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoners, *'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'* [Matt.25:40] For just as Christ lived at Capernaum among benighted gentiles and the lost sheep of Israel, so we must find Him and care for Him in the outsider, the one suffering, and the one wandering astray.

Yet, not only those! The gospel of Christ goes even further and calls upon us to follow Our Lord and love even our enemies, revealing even to them the light of Christ. We too can walk through Zebulon and Naphtali; we can walk, as Psalm 22(23) says, *'Through the valley of the shadow of death.'* Furthermore, says David, *'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.'* No wonder that this psalm is used as part of our preparatory prayers for Holy Communion; it anticipates the grace that comes to us through Chrismation, and our taking of the Lord's body and blood from the sacred chalice. By the fulness of grace, in the light of Christ, we can be in the presence of our enemies and not be overcome, but rather, we may even overcome them with the light and love of Christ. St Paul says, *'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.'* Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.' [Rom.12:20-21]

Yet before all this, we must start with ourselves. Those first words of Christ in His ministry echo from the dark lands Zebulon and Naphtali and come down to us: *'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.'* This is so much more than just compiling a list of transgressions; more than merely a charge-sheet, outlining the commandments that we have broken. It is saying to us, change your mind, because the kingdom is there to be entered; entered now,

available now, not just at the consummation of all things; not just at the final judgement but here and now. Why wait, when it might be too late for us?

The kingdom of God is not some far off land or some event in the future. Abraham, who rejoiced to see Christ's day [Jn.8:56] and aged Simeon, and the prophetess Anna in the temple: they all longed earnestly for the coming of Christ, for the Theophany that we have just celebrated. But Christ did not so much come to bring the kingdom with Him, but rather, to reveal its eternal presence. It is only our own darkness alone that stops us entering in. *'If therefore your eye is good,'* Our Lord says in Matthew. *'Your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.'* [Matt.6:22-23]

*'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'* There is no time like the present, indeed, it is the only time we actually have. Any one of us may have all kinds of darkness within us: unrepented sin, psychological fault lines, hidden secrets, crippling fears, unresolved conflicts, even the shadows of doubts. We have sat long enough in our own gloom. In an astounding passage in his second letter to Timothy [2 Tim.1:9-10] Paul tells us that the grace of Christ was given to us *before time began*. Yes, the kingdom was already there before the beginning! But, he continues, *'Has now been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.'* Through faith, through the renewal of our minds, through repentance, all this can be ours. Then we shall indeed be able to sing that we have seen the true light, received the heavenly Spirit, and found the true Faith!