

## The Feast for the Epiphany of the Christ

### Isaiah 60:1-6

Darkness covers the earth. Although the days are getting longer every day now, and have been for a few weeks, since the solstice, with more hours of sunlight, it is all happening ever so slowly; and if the weather behaves as it usually does around here, a couple of cold months lie ahead of us still. Nevertheless, we do know that brighter days are coming, and warmer.

It seems, also, that the shadow that has laid over the peoples all over the world this last year's time, the constant threat of deadly disease that has been held before us constantly as that around which our life should revolve, the constant calls to think of each other as threats, first and foremost, and to feel guilty for *perhaps* not having done enough to protect ourselves, that it is about to lift, at least from what we hear, that a vaccine is about to be available, although there is still much uncertainty as to exactly how much it will actually change, whether or not we will ever get our life back as we know it, and some seem determined that we never *should* be allowed to have our life back, and at any rate, there will still be a while in which the disease can cause damage and death to ourselves, or to those we love.

Yet another darkness that covers the peoples leaves no sign that it will ever lift and leave us and let us have our life back as we knew it, the veil that lies over the world so that it do not see, of indifference and unbelief and ignorance. The year gone by has made it clear just how thick this darkness has grown. Those hostile to the Church of Christ have not only proven unabashed in their eagerness to single her out for unfavourable treatment, in obvious violation of the law of the land, but have also been virtually unhindered in doing so; and even those not outright hostile to the Church, and perhaps even basically benevolent, but nevertheless ignorant, have shown their willingness to ride roughshod over the particulars of the faith of the faithful in the orders they have issued as to how the faithful are allowed to live their life with God.

To some, this has come as a surprise; to some it has come as so great a surprise that they have not even been able to see and believe that that was actually what happened; that governors set themselves in the place of God when they gave directions for worship, and thereby for the faith, which, obviously, is only for God for to do.

Some of us have been less surprised. Some of us have seen it coming for a long time. Still, even some of us who knew that this was on the way have been surprised to see just how far along it had already come.

It has been a long time coming. And some of us have seen it coming. How could it not, with the thick darkness of indifference and ignorance covering the peoples, so that so many do not see the things of God, and do not care to see, so that congregations faithful to the faith have been shrinking, and even within faithful congregations ever so few actually care about the faith so as to be willing to make sacrifices for the faith, and for the Church, financially or otherwise, and to honour and obey the Word and will of God in the way they actually live and believe and behave.

It seems that the Church of Christ has been in a losing position for decades. It seems that the faith is just not attractive, not to the world outside, and not even to many of our own, and particularly, perhaps, not to our young people; at least that is what we are being told, for it has become the fashionable and clever thing to say.

And it has become increasingly easy to become embarrassed by the faith; to assume that the faith is not really a gift worth giving, and that what has been given to us is not worth holding on to. If our churches are to survive, we need to change our focus, we need to offer something else to those to whom the faith is not appealing enough; later, at some point, when we have brought in our young people, or others to whom the faith has no appeal, *perhaps* we can go back to focusing on the Word of God and what it *actually* teaches, and to worshipping God as He really is, and as He really *must* be worshipped, being who He really is, in reverence and awe. But for now we must forsake the Word and worship of God, that which is the life of His Church, and His Christians, otherwise our church will die.

We hear tonight how God had His Prophet encourage His people, shamed and humiliated as they were, and how He has His Prophet and His Church encourage us today, not to surrender to shame and embarrassment.

*Arise, shine,* says that Prophet, as we hear it, *for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.* Now, these are not words spoken into an age in which the faith could be taken for granted, being generally accepted or respected by society as a whole; rather, it was spoken into a cultural situation much like our own. *Behold, darkness covers the earth, says the Prophet, and thick darkness the peoples.* Into this situation the Lord spoke and speaks His promise.

*Behold, darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but upon you the Lord will arise, and His glory will be seen upon you. In fact, this is real already: Arise, shine, for your Light has come, says the Prophet, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. The Lord looks to His people in love. He has resolved in His heart to restore His people to glory. He has given His promise to His people. And with that, the glory of the Lord has already arisen upon His people, His love is upon her, and His light shines upon her, in His Word, with the full assurance that what He has resolved in His heart must be as real as anything could really be, that what He promises is given already, with His promise. It is real already, in the eternal and real reality of God. Therefore the Prophet could say, as we hear it tonight that he did, already before it had actually taken place in time: Arise, shine, for your Light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

And now it has taken place in time, also, in the history of this world.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, writes the holy Apostle John, and the Word was God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the Word became flesh and set up His sanctuary among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. The Light has come. Not only does light from God shine upon us, no, He who is Himself God from eternity has come to us and become one of us. He has come to have Himself born into our kind and baptised with us to make Himself one with us, and have us baptised and born anew to be one with Him. He has had Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners to take upon Himself the sin of all sinners, and bear it for us. And He has us baptised into Him to give His own righteousness to us, that is: His goodness and innocence before God. He has suffered for us His own judgement against the sin of all sinners, eternal death and damnation, to make us righteous before His judgement, free from all sin and guilt, and give us place with Himself in the eternal life of God, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.*

Now, to those who will know neither of God and His goodness, and the goodness we owe to Him, nor of our own evil, how evil it is that we do not give to God what we owe Him, there is nothing glorious about this, it is only offensive and abominable. In reality, though, this is the glory of God: that He really is that good!

It is the glory the Father has given to the Son from eternity, that He has made Him the Saviour of sinners.

This is the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And to those to whom God gives eyes to see its glory, this Truth cannot be but precious.

*And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising, the Prophet also says. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.*

We celebrate tonight how this began to be fulfilled when wise men from a foreign land were called to worship the newborn King of the Jews. And over the centuries since then, great kings and rulers have seen themselves subject to Him who is really the Ruler of all.

These days it seems that this is an age that has come and gone; although it might also be an age that shall come again. Who knows, other than God?

What we do know is that it remains true what the Prophet spoke: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.* As the Church of Christ, and as His Christians, we have no need to be ashamed or embarrassed about the faith; and we should not be. All our sins and shortcomings are dealt with and done away with. We are clothed in His goodness and glory, who is Himself God from eternity. We are righteous and right with God, heirs to His Kingdom and all heavenly glory. Of this He assures us, in the Word and worship of His salvation, which is the worship of His faithful Church, in which He Himself comes to us, and has His love shine upon us, and shine into us, so as to drive the darkness away from our hearts and fill us with His light. *Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

In the Word and worship of His salvation the greatest love of all shines upon us. And in those to whom God gives eyes to see His glory, He will bring His work of salvation to completion, in our day and age as in all days and ages.

So let us not be ashamed of that which is the most glorious of all; rather, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*

Glory be to God on High, and on earth peace, good will toward men! Amen.