

Epiphany 2019 (Isaiah 60:1-6)

The Feast of Epiphany, which this year falls on a Sunday (today), celebrates the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi who are led by the light of a star (which also symbolizes Christ, the Bright Morning Star) to worship baby Jesus and, as we've seen, offer him gifts denoting his Kingship, Divinity and Saving death. Traditionally, it was another important and joyful church festival following hot on the heels of Christmas. It is also, by custom, the day for taking down Christmas decorations (if you haven't done so already) and, for me, has personal significance as being very close to the day I gave my life to Christ (45 years ago) and the exact day my mother died (40 years ago). But at its heart is that idea of the Magi as the first example of people from all nations (not just Israel) being drawn to Jesus, the light of the World.

Isaiah 60:1-6 is the classic Old Testament reading for Epiphany and if you still have your Bibles open at that passage it will be helpful (perhaps we can keep it on screen as well). It's easy to see why the early church quickly associated this prophecy (together with Psalm 72) with the visit of the Magi. The references to nations being drawn to Zion's light, riding on camels and bringing lavish gifts (specifically gold and incense), and proclaiming the praise of the Lord, all led them straight to Matthew 2 and the story of the Wise Men following the star.

You can also see how some of the traditions surrounding them grew up as the early church read back details from Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 into that story. For instance, the idea that the Magi were Kings, as well as scholars or astrologers, was inferred from verse 3 (*Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn*) and from these similar words from Psalm 72,

May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him.

May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts.

May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.

The idea that the Magi represent different races, or even three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe), was also read back from those verses referring to exotic Eastern places and from the mention of Midian, Ephah and Sheba in Isaiah 60:6. In Matthew, however, it seems more likely that they all came from the same race and place of origin, somewhere in the East, maybe Persia.

One of the challenges of reading Biblical prophecy is that there can be different layers of interpretation: the immediate historical application, but also layers of meaning pointing to more distant futures and more figurative interpretations. The original application of Isaiah 60 was a message of hope to the Jewish exiles in Babylon that they will return to the land of Israel and Jerusalem will be restored to a greater glory than before due to the wealth of all

nations flowing into her. That's the first layer. But as we've seen, the early church soon saw another application to the arrival of Christ in the world: he is Jerusalem's true light, displacing the darkness covering all nations and drawing them to himself – with the Magi in the vanguard. If they indeed came from Persia (formally Babylon, the land from which the Jews came back from exile), it made a neat link between the two. Bringing it up to date, some Christians (though not all) see an end times interpretation of a restored Jerusalem, prior to or following Christ's return, with a dramatic prelude in the migration of Jewish people from all over the world to the land of Israel since the end of the Second World War.

Bearing all those meanings in mind (the return from exile in the 6th century BC, the coming of Christ, and the future restoration of Jerusalem, either literal or metaphorical) let's look at verses 1-2. In addition to those three big picture meanings, Christians down the ages have found great personal encouragement and inspiration in these words... and so can we.

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.*

I never know quite how much store to set by the Amplified Bible, but on this occasion its expanded rendering of the first two words expressed exactly what I was already thinking. Listen to this:

*Arise [from the depression and prostration in which circumstances have kept you—
rise to a new life]! Shine (be radiant with the glory of the Lord)*

In other words, 'Arise and shine' is much more than a cheery order to get out of bed and eat your cornflakes! It's a promise of hope for depressed people. Isaiah's original message of return from exile came to a depressed, dispirited group in Babylon. And 400 years later, Christ was born to a depressed nation who (although technically dwelling in their own land) were subject to Roman domination and were far from enjoying the glories promised in this chapter.

This is a bad moment in the year for depression: the dead of winter, days not noticeably lengthening yet, Christmas and New Year past and maybe didn't live up to expectations, holidays over and finances stretched for the same reason. We can all feel low at this time of year (I certainly felt a little sad putting away the Christmas decorations yesterday) but that's very different from true depression which can strike at any time and has far more serious effects.

When you're suffering from depression, you lose all sense of purpose – drive and desire literally to get out of bed in the morning and fulfil your God-given role in the world. There is also a loss of identity and self-worth – the sense of who you are and that you matter in the eyes of God and others. And finally, emotions like joy and excitement seem like a distant unrecoverable memory. Depression is a complex phenomenon, which can have physical causes, but often occurs when one's own pain, or the pain of others, becomes so hard to bear that the emotions shut down leaving sufferers in a dull, colourless world where there is little enjoyment of life or motivation for even small tasks.

Although I have suffered from periods of mild, sub-clinical depression or low mood, thankfully I've never had to deal with the serious affliction some do. But I have witnessed family members go through it and know how devastating it can be. People often describe depression as like being in a dark pit that you can see no way out of. In that sense, it is part of the *darkness covering the earth, the thick darkness over the peoples*. Now don't mishear me. If you are suffering from depression, I am not saying you are evil, or have sinned, or that it's *all-your-own-fault* – things depressed people often wrongly believe. I'm simply saying that it's part of the fallen state of humanity, the brokenness of God's good creation and, as such, is a work of the devil. But it isn't a sign of individual sin or failure. Often those prone to depression are highly sensitive people who are so conscious of their own or other people's suffering that it temporarily overwhelms them.

There aren't always simplistic or immediate cures for depression, but there is an ultimate antidote – the light of Christ which dispels all darkness including the darkness of depression. That's the great hope contained in these verses: *Arise, shine, for your light has come*. Jesus is the light for Jerusalem, for the exiles longing to return, for the oppressed nation into which he was born, and for everyone walking through a valley of shadows. The words of verse 5,

then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy

must have seemed like an impossible dream to all those groups of people. But those are the kind of impossibilities God deals in. His message to depressed nations and depressed individuals, who are somehow clinging on to their faith in him, is that light has come and will come. Christ the light is the ultimate antidote to depression.

So here we are at the beginning of another year and what are we saying? The same thing the church has faithfully proclaimed through the centuries: ***Christ is the world's one true light***. He's the only light we know, the only light you can rely on in this sad, dark world, the only light which cannot be overcome and will ultimately scatter all darkness from before our path. This we hold to be true when everything else is shaken: ***Jesus Christ the light of the World***.

But there's more. It's not just that Christ's light has come and will ultimately do away with all darkness and despair. His light comes on us for others to see: *the glory of the LORD rises upon you... his glory appears over you (or upon you)*. That's the most powerful form of evangelism there is: when other people can see the glory of God shining out of another human being. In Isaiah 60 it is the glory of the Lord upon Zion that draws the Gentile nations to God. In the NT, Paul talks about our faces reflecting his glory, like Moses' face shining when he came down from the mountain.

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
(be radiant with the glory of the Lord)*

A few times in my life people have commented that they can see the light of Christ shining in me. Needless to say, I was totally unaware of it at the time. We can't control when or the extent to which his light is seen on us, but we can position ourselves to bear his glory by seeking and welcoming it. We can also get out among people who don't yet know him, so they'll have a chance of seeing his light reflected in our lives. The light is seen most clearly in us when we're walking humbly with our God and loving others. As soon as we start to think we deserve it or control it, that it's somehow because we're so spiritual or godly, we will tarnish or lose his glory. But this world desperately needs the light of Christ. And one of the ways they will see that is in you and me.

Let me end by praying for two groups of people and for obvious reasons I'm not going to ask the first group to identify yourselves. That's to say people who are experiencing depression. Then, I'll pray that we will all be bearers of the light of Christ this year. **Prayer**

For discussion (Isaiah 6.1-6):

1. *See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.* What are some of the forms this darkness takes in today's world?
2. Specifically, how can we support people who suffer from depression (which is often described as like a dark pit)?
3. How have you experienced the light of Christ and what difference has it made?
4. How can we 'arise and shine' so that others may see Christ's light?