

Isaiah 61: 1 - 6

Psalms 72

Ephesians 3:1 - 12

Matthew 2:1-12

Arise, shine; your light has come!

During Advent and 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, life wasn't all that exciting for the home-comers. Their mood was despondent and hopeless. But now in the later Chapters of Isaiah a new tone emerges and a brilliant end-time vision is proclaimed. *Arise, shine; your light has come!* is an announcement, and an invitation. 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. 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 many rich and exotic gifts and treasures. In a time of deep despondency Israel is shown that the favour of God shines upon her, to call her to emerge from insignificance into fullness of life, and setting in train the pilgrimage of nations who come with gifts, not to prosper Jerusalem, 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 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 known is overcome. This is what is meant by salvation, and in this hope the people of God may live, empowered to contradict all the forms of darkness they encounter.

The star which 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 which touches all people, was found to shine. The sign of this is the Magi - foreigners, 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 are foreigners and do not belong to the faith of Israel is a radical statement about the kind of sovereignty that belongs to the Light of God. When they bring forth their gifts for the Christ child, Matthew intends us to see that here, in keeping with Isaiah's vision, the world has come with its gifts to worship the presence of God.

There are two other relationships of interest in connection with the Magi. They 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 the power of darkness is frustrated where people remain responsive to the Light.

The other relationship that is exposed by the light in this story is that of 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. Their knowledge is ahead of that of the Magi at an intellectual level. What they lack is any 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 which turns mourning into joy. Matthew shows light, which has the power to shame ecclesiastical authority and overturn imperial designs. The light of which we speak here has a sovereignty like no other. It offers us a hope, which 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 is 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 our versions of Herod's antics in the world today, ponder what might happen on the world stage as important leaders die, are assaulted by nay sayers who see no future for the church or religion, 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 which 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 the darkness, which has been overcome, will be seen to be overcome, by the power and the grace of God.