

Light Overcoming Darkness

WNMC, Matins
Jan. 22, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Is. 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Cor. 1:10-18; Matt. 4:12-23

Verse for Reflection: “The people living in darkness have seen a great light.”

(Matt 4:16)

Hymn of Response: Hymnal, #216 “Christ, whose glory fills the skies”

Other hymns: Several under “Light” heading

Introduction:

It wasn't very difficult to find a unifying theme in our lectionary readings for this morning.

-and I don't at all mind giving a homily about “light overcoming darkness”

-the imagery is powerful

- “The people living in darkness have seen a great light.”

I want to look at 4 different aspects of light overcoming darkness as found in our readings and related texts.

I am not going to deal with our reading in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians

-I think the theme of light overcoming the darkness is implicit in that reading as well, but I just don't have time to show how

-So that is your homework - I like assigning homework in my homilies!

1. Walking in the Light and Being a Light to the Nations:

I want to start with Isaiah

-When we read O.T. texts, I believe it is important to first of all try to understand them in their specific and local contexts

-Yes, we can interpret Isaiah as pointing to Christ, as in fact our gospel reading does, but my hunch is that this can only be done in retrospect, as has been argued by Richard Hays in a recent book.

-So I prefer to interpret Isaiah as addressing a very local situation.

What I found interesting in preparing this homily was how often the imagery of light overcoming darkness is used in Isaiah and in Matthew, and indeed in the entire bible.

- the book of Isaiah begins with the LORD himself calling on the heavens to hear his cry: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me” (Is 1:2)
- and then comes an agonizing sigh: “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, ... children ... who have despised the Holy One of Israel” (Is 1:4)

The chapter continues with a long litany of Israel’s sins

- But then, Isaiah moves on to another picture
- a picture of what might be possible if only Israel were faithful

What follows in Chapter 2 is a wonderful description of the nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, to be taught the ways of the Lord (Is 2:3)

- but there is a condition attached, which comes in the form of an invitation to Israel: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD (2:5)
- here you have the theme of light being introduced in Isaiah for the first time
- Israel can be a light to the nations only if the people themselves walk in the light of the Lord
- So it is with us today.
 - The Church will only be a light to the nations, if we ourselves are walking in the light of the Lord.

2. Light in the midst of political turmoil:

Our lectionary reading in Isaiah chapter 9, is one of 23 other references to the theme of darkness and light in the book of Isaiah.

- the context in Ch. 9 is very different - it is political in nature
- Chapter 8 describes the immanent threat of invasion by the king of Assyria
 - Israel and Syria are urging King Ahaz to join them in an anti-Assyrian coalition
 - and, as one can easily imagine, in all this political turmoil there is a lot of fear
 - even to the point of dabbling in the occult (8:19)

Listen to how Isaiah describes these people in the last verse of Chapter 8:

-Read Is. 8:22b

-the chapter division is very unfortunate, because the Hebrew continues right on to provide a contrast in 9:1 - Read

-and then come these words of hope – Read 9:2

Ah yes, we still need words of assurance like this today, don't we?

-we live in some very dark times politically

-if we are honest, we will have to admit that we are scared

So we need to listen to Isaiah.

-God is still in charge. He is the Sovereign King.

-don't fear what others are fearing, the Lord says to Isaiah in ch. 8 verse 12

-and don't call conspiracy what the people call conspiracy

And don't ever give up hope

-a few verses down in the same Chapter there are the familiar words of the chorus of the Messiah that many of us heard before Christmas

-in the midst of the darkness of political turmoil that we see in the world today, we must always keep before us the hope that some day children will be born who will be more perfect rulers than the ones that we have at present on the international stage.

-and some future day, political authority will be given to one who is a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

-We need to be people of hope as we live in dark times.

3. Jesus as the Light:

We move on to our reading in Matthew for a third application of the theme of light and darkness.

-our Matthew reading describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry

-Matthew is careful to link Jesus' ministry to that of John the Baptist

-We are told that Jesus launched his ministry after John was arrested by Herod and imprisoned.

We are also told that at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus moved from his home town of Nazareth to an area surrounding the Sea of Galilee, to the town of Capernaum.

The Province of Galilee supported a dense population.

- Josephus, who was once its governor, tells us that there were no fewer than 204 villages in the province, each of them with over 15,000 inhabitants.
- The text goes on to give us some details about Galilee, drawing on our Isaiah reading.

Galilee also stood on one of the oldest and most important trade routes in the East, the “Way of the Sea,” from Damascus down to Egypt
-hence the reference to the road by the sea in verse 15 of our gospel reading

This verse also makes reference to “Galilee of the Gentiles,” no doubt alluding to the fact that Galilee was surrounded by heathen nations,
-indeed, for half a millennium before the second century BC, Galilee was in pagan hands, and it was an area where the Greek language, pagan customs, and non-Jewish influences held sway (Green, *Matthew*, p. 85)

This is the context in which Matthew, drawing on Isaiah, says: “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” (Matt. 4:16).

- It is an incredible claim
 - the coming of Jesus is here described as a great light coming to a region of darkness and death
- and let’s remember that this is being said in the context of there being many different kinds of religious and irreligious belief in the area
 - in the academic world and even in the church it is often assumed that religious pluralism is a new phenomenon
 - this is simply a false assumption
 - Matthew is making this claim about Jesus being a great light within the context of religious pluralism

We generally associate the image of light and darkness with the Gospel of John, which is my favorite gospel, and which begins with a marvelous description of the Incarnation in terms of light shining in the darkness (Jn 1:5)

But this same imagery is used several times in Matthew

-Jesus is a great light, shining in the darkness of unbelief and paganism and pluralism.

Earlier in Matthew we are told that John the Baptist wasn't the great light

-- Jesus was. -----

-Menno Simons isn't the great light ----- Jesus is.

-Each of us isn't a great light – as finite and fallible creatures, we can only be imitators and reflectors of Jesus, who is a great light, shining in the darkness.

4. Jesus' Message:

We look finally at Jesus' message.

-It seems Jesus is introducing a new topic, but I think he is continuing on the same theme

– Read Matt 4:17

-it is the very same message that John the Baptist gave, as recorded in the previous chapter of Matthew

-the call to repentance entails that there is something wrong with us

-Jesus is assuming that people are living in the darkness of sin

-Therefore, repent, Jesus says

-you don't have to be afraid

-I am the light that exposes all that is evil and dark

-but I also come full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14)

And then Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven being near, another dominant theme in Matthew's gospel.

-the kingdom of heaven represents God's rule over his world, which Jesus announced and initiated in a new way, and which will be consummated at the end of time

There is, of course, also an enemy of the kingdom – Satan

-we read about the devil tempting Jesus earlier in this same chapter

-the devil's domain is the kingdom of darkness (Matt 12:24-9; 8:12; cf. Col. 1:13)

- by contrast, Jesus invites the people then, and us today, to enter the kingdom of heaven
- submit to my rule
- and you will find it wonderfully freeing
- it will be like walking in the light

Conclusion:

I conclude with the words of Psalm 27.

“The LORD is my light and my salvation.”

May the prayer of David be our own:

“One thing I ask of the LORD ... to live in the presence of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty (and the glory and the light) of the Lord.” (vs. 4)

Amen.