

## Sermon for Epiphany 3: Matthew 4:12-23

### **Jesus is the light in our darkness.**

Light and darkness. You find these two linked images everywhere in the Bible (especially the Psalms, the Gospels and the Epistles). The biblical writers use it so much because in Bible times the experience of light and darkness was far more stark than today. Light and darkness, one could even say, ruled peoples' lives.

When darkness falls today, we just flick on an electric light – issue solved. But in the ancient world, when darkness fell it was very different. You might have oil lamps or flickering candles to help you see your immediate surroundings, somewhat dimly. But otherwise the darkness surrounded you, and in a very real sense, restricted you. You could not work or travel or do any real activity. You could not see what was happening, where you were going, or, importantly, what/who was advancing upon you. In the dark you were vulnerable and in danger, including spiritual danger. Evil forces hid in the darkness and evil and sinful deeds were done in the dark. Even when people went into the deep shadows of a valley, leaving behind the direct light of day, they saw themselves entering a place of danger and death (psalm 23). The darkness is a place of terror and danger.

But then, as we find everywhere in the Bible too, when light comes, as the dawn breaks, the world is visible again and you can see and understand what is going on. People watched and waited for the dawn, for the light of the new day that brought with it safety and relief. You can see what is going on. You can go about your work. You could move around with safety. You can see other peoples' faces. The light reveals things as they are, and dispels our feelings of apprehension. It brings joy and relief from the fears of the night.

In this season of Epiphany, this light-darkness thing has been one of the big traditional biblical themes the church has focussed on. As we celebrate Christmas and Christ's coming to us in the flesh, God has *enlightened* us, revealed his salvation to the world, shone his heavenly light into the darkness of the world so we can see what he is doing, how he is saving us from the darkness all around us, and yes also the darkness within us, in this world. It is here in today's readings of course.

In Isaiah 9 the people who walked in darkness (a very dangerous activity) have seen a great light. Isaiah is prophesying, way back in the seventh century BC, of a time to come in Israel's future when God will save them from the darkness of their own sin and God's punishment, and shine again on them the 'great light', the heavenly light of his forgiveness and favour. God had punished Israel for their rejection of God and his covenant. He allowed the Assyrian invaders from the North to violently march in and conquer Israel. It is a stark and disturbing piece of history.

Isaiah's words here are addressed particularly to the border regions of Israel's north, Zebulon and Naphtali, the places hardest hit by the Assyrian armies as they poured across the borders, with great brutality and ruthlessness. These lands were the killing fields, where the Assyrians brutally slayed many they found there. These lands were later also the last to be liberated from the Assyrians. This terrible event, this 'darkness' came on Israel because *they* first darkened their minds and hearts – they no longer obeyed and worshipped God, but had abandoned his covenant, and so God allowed them to experience that darkness, and where it leads.

In Matthew 4, today's Gospel, Isaiah's prophecy of the great light coming into Israel's darkness is fulfilled. Jesus, the light of the world, has come. Where does he begin his ministry? Verse 13 tells us he went back to live in these very same northern borderlands of Galilee, the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali, in the city of Capernaum, in the lands of the deepest darkness, where the memory of the

Assyrians' violent attack was still all too well remembered. Jesus, the great light comes to the 'region and shadow of death' and sin. Isaiah's prophecy is thus fulfilled: On *them* (the people of that region with its dark and bloody history) the light has dawned (verse 16).

Immediately Matthew goes on to tell us what exactly this light is – in verse 17: *from that time on Jesus began to preach saying repent, the kingdom of Gods is here*. That is the light: the call to repentance and forgiveness, God's loving rule is here: mercy for your sins, forgiveness and life right here and now.

Jesus shone this light, this Gospel, for his whole earthly ministry, in his preaching, calling sinners to repent and receive his forgiveness, life and salvation. All through Matthew's Gospel we see it unfolding in Jesus' teaching. Later on in chapter 5 Jesus talks about not hiding the light under a clay jar and in chapter 6 he talks about our eye being the lamp of the body that brings light, without which our whole bodies are full of darkness. Jesus shines his light not only onto but into people. He shines his light through healing the sick (as we see later in chapter 4, showing that he is restoring, in his ministry, what sin has destroyed. He shines his light on Simon and Andrew and James and John, calling them as his student preachers and apostles, whom he will prepare for ministry, and in time send to shine the light of his Gospel in the world through their apostolic ministries, just as Jesus still does today, calling people into the apostolic ministry of the church, as pastors and missionaries, to shine the light in the world, to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments and exercise the office of the keys, declaring this Gospel light – the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus shines his light into the very valley of death's shadow as he died on the cross, completing his atonement for the sin of the whole world. And of course that heavenly light shone *brilliantly* on Easter morning from the empty tomb (as Matthew reports it in chapter 28) – the light of eternal life for all who hear that message, 'repent and believe in Jesus'.

This light Isaiah and Matthew speak about is no mere earthly light, or just some kind of picture language, but the true light of heaven: the light described in Luke 2 on the night of Jesus' birth, as the angel's came to announce the nativity to the shepherds. It is the light find in John 1:1-14 (worth opening your Bible and reading that later today). It is the light that appears everywhere in Revelation.

It is the light we will all see with our own eyes when we meet Jesus face to face, the 'perpetual light' of God that shines on the saints who have gone before us into eternity, as it is described in the great requiem prayer *lux aeterna* (which you may have heard at a funeral).

That light is shining for us today too. And, as in Jesus' earthly ministry, not just onto us but also into us.

In our deep darkness, yes even our deepest darkness, the worst places humans can be, where we are frightened and ashamed and humiliated by our own sins, or by others' sins against us, or where the sin that lies heavily over our whole world, like a blanket of darkness, brings pain and suffering. In these places, on these people light of Christ has dawned, on us, on you.

- On us, who, like Israel, struggle with the damage that our sin has done in our lives or others' lives – broken relationships, conflict in families, emotional, spiritual and mental injuries that have resulted – on all of that the light of Christ shines, as we hear his call to repentance and receive his forgiveness.
- On those who are victims of abuse and cruelty, who carry the darkness of the wounds around with them deep inside.

- Where we experience illness of body, mind or soul, Christ's light shines, bringing peace and strength.
- On you dear people of God who are grieving and in deep sorrow, Christ's heavenly light is shining, bringing comfort and peace.
- In our experiences of insecurity, change, uncertainty in these insane covid times, Christ shines his light of hope and the certainty of his love.
- On you for whom death is not far away, Christ's heavenly light is shining with the promise of eternal life.

Just as Isaiah prophesied, Jesus, the light of the world has dawned on us, in our 'region of the shadow of death'. It shines everyday; it is not just a subjective feeling or an inner sense of wellness, but a true light, from outside of us, shining on us through Christ's 'external means': in our baptism, where calls us out of the darkness of sin and death into his own glorious light (1 Peter 2:9). That light that shone on us first in our baptism, and made us children of the light (Ephesians 5:8) shines on us and in us everyday as we hear Jesus' call to repentance and forgiveness.

It shines on us brightly and intensely when we hear the words of forgiveness in the divine service. Christ shines into us as we receive him in the holy Supper.

On us poor sinners the light shines continually, without wavering – without any variation or shadow of change as James says (1:17), no matter how we feel or how we fail or how we fall.

The words spoken in those ancient days by Isaiah were fulfilled hundreds of years later when Jesus, the light of the world, became flesh and shone heavenly light into the darkness of human lives, but they also are fulfilled again here and now as God comes to us here and now.