

Light has come

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Coming home from a Hogmanay Party, early on New Year's Day morning, I had opportunity to look up to Arthur's Seat. Set darker against even the midnight sky, I saw a light high up at the summit. And I wondered who would be up there. To whom did that light belong? What scrambling up the unlit paths had taken place, to that vantage point high above our city.

The view is always spectacular, but on Hogmanay, our city is particularly bright with illuminations and fireworks. But it was not that great sea of light that I could see from ground level. It was that one tiny pinpoint of light, high, high up on the hill. Up where it was surrounded by great darkness. Up where it was dangerous to walk. Up where the bearer of the light was not visible, but the light they carried could be seen.

The Christian feast of Epiphany, which fell yesterday, marks the end of the season of Christmas, and the beginning of a new season in the Christian year. Epiphany means the 'shining forth' of God's glory, a manifestation, a revelation. In less churchy language an epiphany is an 'aha' moment. A time when we get a new understanding or appreciation of something. The light goes on, and we see.

In a time of despair and discouragement, the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading offers more than encouragement; he offers a vision so glorious and compelling that anyone who trusts (in God) will be inspired and motivated to work hard to rebuild and renew (their world and their people).ⁱ From the thick darkness of their 7th BC exile in Babylon-Persia, modern-day Iraq, the Jewish exiles were allowed to return home. Their long dream of returning to the land of their forebears, and its ancient city of Jerusalem, and its ancient Temple. They knew after their defeat

that most things had been destroyed by the Persians, but nothing prepared the returning exiles for the devastation they found. The seventy-year exile revealed a mess no-one expected. Instead of a much-loved homeland they found crumbling buildings, incompetent and corrupt authorities, and a terrible apathy towards the nation's religious life. Imagine Palestinian refugees returning to Gaza; or Ukrainians to their cities and towns and villages; or soldiers returning from the war to bombed and blitzed Britain. In our time think of people in recent days and weeks returning to flooded homes, and what that must feel like to them. In Isaiah's time this was not at all what the C7th Jewish exiles had set their hopes upon.

This is no word of unreality, glossing over the awfulness. This is a real and honest look at what the world was like. And maybe it speaks to people in our world today. "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples..." Faith will never obscure the truth, nor close its eyes to reality. Belief sees honestly and with open eyes. But that is not all that it sees. The C17th English philosopher and essayist Francis Bacon wrote: "In order for the light to shine so brightly the darkness must be present."

Far away, or high up, or even deep down, light comes. Someone says a word, or does something, and that terrible darkness begins, maybe too slowly, to lift. The light brings an understanding. The light warms our numbness. The light invites us into action. The light shows us what we might yet be able to do, on our own, or more likely with others.

Isaiah doesn't underestimate the task ahead of the returning exiles and does not sugar-coat the reality of what needed to be done, but his words of light and darkness come at a time when the words, the vision help to begin to define the strange shapes of the present and the future, seeing the absence, but seeing also the presence. Isaiah speaks the truth about darkness, and

brokenness, and fearfulness, and uncertainty, but also speaks the truth about light, and healing, and hope and a way ahead.

When heads were down, when the task ahead seemed too much, Isaiah says to his people, "Lift up your eyes round about, and see..."

Lift up your eyes and see. Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Isaiah sees people from all over the world coming to see this new light. It is picked up by Matthew in his gospel telling of the later days of the nativity, when visitors from the east, bearing gifts of gold and frankincense, and the addition of myrrh, come to Bethlehem.

Who were these Magi, these wise men, whose costly gifts led some to think of them as kings?

They were people who had been studying and were ready to recognise a sign when it appeared.

They didn't keep their noses in books all of the time but were keen observers of the world around them. They were willing to seek confirmation of what they had learned and seen. They lifted up

their heads to see the light, but they also put their feet in motion to follow the star. They were willing to ask for direction along the way. Having found what they sought, they showed their

gratitude as generously as they were able. On their return, they remained vigilant and observant,

and ready to travel home by another way if needs be. It's almost like an ancient metaphor for trying to get up and down Braid Road, or many other roads in Edinburgh! Who knew an old Bible

story might have something to say to Edinburgh City Council?

Knowing what God promises, His glory, His light, is not the end of the journey of faith, but the beginning. A time for continuing Epiphany, understanding, revelation, maybe even surprise.

At this time of Epiphany, and the Christian season will run on for a few weeks, we are called to follow the light, to have those 'Aha!' moments, and to understand again, or for the first time, what

Christmas is about, what Easter is about, what Jesus is about. A light in the darkness, a peace in the time of war, a gift of plenty in a time of hunger, a stability in a time that is unsettled, a love in a time of hate, an encouragement in a time of resignation, a hope in the despair.

I look around at the state of the world and worry what 2024 might bring. Yet God through His prophet tells me to arise, and shine, for light is coming and to lift up my eyes. Not only that I might see God shining, but that in God's reflected light, I might shine too. Fitfully, incompletely, but shine nonetheless. Might it be the same for you? Shine with the determination and wisdom, the generosity and kindness, the faithfulness, and the hopefulness that, despite everything, when you are at your absolute best, is who you are and how you are made. God's shining people in the sometime darkness of this present day.

When I am baptising an infant, and it seems to happen most times, when I take the child in my arms, and do that baby-whispering thing that seems to quieten them a little, I often note that the infants' little hands are tightly shut. But if you take your finger and touch the infants' hand they'll often open up, and grab hold of your finger. It reminds me of a poem called Epiphany by

Madeleine L'Engle

*Unclench your fists
Hold out your hands.
Take mine.
Let us hold each other.
Thus is his Glory
Manifest.*

When Christmas and Epiphany comes, it is not just God reaching out to us, it is also us reaching out to God, so that we, together, might hold God's hand, that we might hold each other, and that somehow, in that intimate, tender touch, we realise Who we are holding, and Who is holding us.

God revealed, in a helpless, vulnerable child, depending on our work, as much as we are dependent upon His ultimate grace.

That distant, tiny light high up on Arthur's Seat on Hogmanay, as an old year ended and a New Year began. Who was that brave, maybe even foolhardy soul, with that little light. But it pierced the darkness, and was a sign, despite everything, against all the odds, that darkness will not overcome light, and that by whatever way we journey on, God's light still shines.

In Gaza and Jerusalem. In Kyiv and Moscow. In Edinburgh and London. In court rooms and Parliaments and schools and universities and hospitals and offices and shops and art galleries and concert halls and nursing homes and shelters for the homeless and stables and churches.

Our Epiphany. God' star. The Christ-child. The light has come.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Katherine C Calore, Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol 1, p195*