

REFRACTING THE LIGHT

Epiphany 3 – Cycle A

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

I'm always fascinated by how a prism can bend white light, refracting it into all the colours of the rainbow. This prism is the wrong shape to refract light onto the floor, wall, or ceiling – we would need a prism with fewer angles to accomplish that – but if you look into the centre of this crystal, you can see colours, both within the glass itself and sparkling on the surface. Some years ago, Sarah Hall, creator of our stained glass windows, told me that she never tires of the beauty of light passing through glass; and yes, in some of her windows, she includes prisms to increase the delight of those whose eyes she catches with her dramatic and innovative use of art glass.

Light, not only in the language of faith, but also in its general understanding in our culture carries a positive value. At this time of the year in our part of the world, there is an abundance of darkness each day, and we can't help finding ourselves noticing the gradual return of the light after the winter solstice as each sunrise begins a little earlier and each sunset begins a little later. In our imagination, we can see spring and summer with their long hours of daylight and warmth, as compared with the present reality of darkness and cold. Light and darkness are metaphors, to be sure, but they are metaphors that enter our life and experience through our natural environment in winter and summer in the Northern hemisphere. They are metaphors for which we have emotional resonance.

And so, when we read in today's poem from the book of the prophet Isaiah that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," Isaiah's metaphor needs little explanation. We immediately understand that the light to which he refers communicates a dramatic turn of events for the better. Within the context of faith, it suggests God's intervention in the events of human history or, in this case, the birth of hope in reign of King Hezekiah. In writing of light, Isaiah heralds a new age in which Israel's provinces taken by the Assyrians, described in this passage through the reference to Zebulun and Naphtali, will be returned to them; and the darkness of oppression, represented by the slave's yoke across their shoulders, will be lifted. Gloom will be replaced by glory; their dark days will fade in the light of God's unambiguous presence and goodness.

The psalmist in Psalm 27 also equates light with the presence and power of God. The context for this poem is the Temple at Jerusalem, and it is in this temple that the nearer presence of God is experienced as light, as beauty, and even as the face of God. "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek," writes the psalmist. But the light of God for this author also offers protection from the darkness of enemies, a bridge from the First Reading and its reference to Hezekiah's countering Assyrian aggression against Israel.

In today's Gospel, it is Jesus who is seen by the gospel-writer, Matthew, as light. The context, Matthew tells us, is very dark indeed. John, the forerunner and baptizer, who, in both last week's Gospel and our Gospel from the week before, identified in both passages as God's messenger preparing the saving and healing ministry Jesus will undertake, this same John is arrested and will eventually be executed by Herod. Matthew says that Jesus withdrew to Galilee, suggesting his need to make new beginnings in a remote location that gave him some distance from Herod. Jesus chooses Capernaum in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, and Matthew cannot resist making the connection with Isaiah's prophecy from the time of Hezekiah, equating Jesus' making his home and establishing his ministry in these outlying provinces as the return of God's presence and goodness. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light," Matthew writes quoting Isaiah; "for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned."

This light, this goodness and presence of God, this nearness of God described by the psalmist, this Jesus who we will come to know through the readings of the coming weeks and months as our Lord and Saviour constitutes the inheritance of those who are called by faith. It is more than a tradition, it is our birthright through faith. As those who worship God, as those who are called into discipleship by Jesus and the gospel as surely as were Peter, Andrew, James, and John, we are children of the light – the light that is God's presence and goodness, the light that is Christ Jesus. And like the prism, we can refract that light into greater beauty for the world around us – through our loyalty to the gospel Jesus proclaimed,

through establishing a community in which his gospel is paramount in determining who we become, not only as those who look to Jesus and see the face of God, but who we become as people for others.

Today's Second Reading illustrates how easily we can dim that light through the opaqueness of willfulness and sin. This gifted, beloved congregation Paul spent so much energy trying to form always, it seems, struggle to get it right. Today's passage shows us yet another episode in which human nature wins the day. The congregation has broken into factions, Paul has learned, one faction claiming superiority over the other. Some have loyalty to Paul himself, whereas others are disciples of Peter, referred to in this reading as Cephas. Others gather around Apollos, and still others claim a pure understanding by citing Christ Jesus himself as their only source of faith and belief. The community is a mess, and Paul takes them to task for misrepresenting the gospel. It's not about correct belief or wisdom, understanding, or interpretation, he tells them: it's about Jesus being the very light of God through his birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. When we forget about the light the darkness could not overcome, we not only miss the point, we become something quite different: a community that has lost its way; a community through which no light can shine!

The call of today's readings, especially our Second Reading and Gospel, is discipleship – discipleship that is formed by the light that is Jesus and his gospel, and discipleship that refracts the light of God's presence and goodness in Jesus for the world around us. We are challenged on many fronts, as well as from within. As the old Sunday School hymn reminds us, "in this world is darkness, so we must shine" – darkness within and without.

In today's issue of *Christ Calling* and in the letter those who are not present at worship this morning will receive in the mail this week, the call to discipleship made through New Consecration Sunday is woven in, with, and under the call to be good stewards. Please read the article that summarizes the emphasis of New Consecration Sunday: we haven't lost our way as regards stewardship, but it is, without question, a growth area in our discipleship: approximately 25% of our congregation contributes 90% of the funds we need for our mission and ministry each year. It's time to have a conversation about our faith and how we value the ministry and care and community programming and concern for people in need through our church. My guess is that we haven't thought much about the connection of faith and our ministry together because we haven't talked about it enough. It's time to have the conversation about how we value our inheritance of light and what we need to be able to refract that light for one another and for those beyond our community for whom we represent a moral and spiritual mooring.

The discipleship to which Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, is a ministry characterized by grace and mercy. In a world driven by power and judgement, greed and self-centeredness, grace and mercy are easily displaced. Grace and mercy are light for the darkness within and without. Jesus calls us to the light that it might be refracted, enhanced and dispersed into the dark corners of our world, into the dark corners of our humanity. We are called to be children of the light.