

THE ETERNAL LIGHT DRIVES BACK THE DARKNESS

Hear the Word of God for this Eve of the Nativity, with our hearts centered by the following freshly translated verse:

The people dwelling in darkness, they see Great Light, upon the ones dwelling in a land of deep darkness, Light has shined (Isaiah 9:2 (1)).

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

This evening, as Advent transitions into the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, we recall that this year God has worked this season into a time of public confession of the Faith. Here, over the past week in particular people have been moved to making the good confession of Christ's Faith. Tonight, we have even heard that such confession is shared by the heavenly hosts. We have sung of that reality, not because of sentimentality, but due to our public confession that Christ Jesus is the eternal Son of God. This evening, our hymns have led us to confess that He, to bridge the gap between the everlasting God and fallen, sinful, humans took on our flesh.

From words recorded, declared, and heard in the Church for more than 3,500 years, we recall this evening God's fulfilling His Promise to send the One Who would mortally wound the evil serpent's head. To enable us to better listen to the inspired, inerrant Word of Life and Light in a world of death and darkness, we have been following a tradition of King's College, Cambridge. That institution is part of a Church body that places great emphasis on getting the public services of the Church right, in terms of order and practice.

However, because God has committed us, in the Church in this place, to public confession that is spoken forth in the enduring proclamation of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of the whole world's sins, we have again added to tradition. Scriptures clearly teach that forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life in Christ are to be proclaimed into the whole world. Therefore, sermons, oral declarations of the Word, illumined by the Word, are preached each year here during this early 20th century order of service (1918 composed, 1928 first broadcast). The proclaimed Word of God, in

Scripture readings, Hymns, Sermons, and Sacraments, is God's means of grace to bring life, and light to sinners living in the deep darkness of sin and death. That is part of the reason why this message, heard for about 2,800 years in many languages in most parts of the world, is still important this evening:

The people dwelling in darkness, they see Great Light, upon the ones dwelling in a land of deep darkness, Light has shined (Isaiah 9:2 (1)).

It is true, this evening, when words like those were declared here, physical darkness surrounded this building. Even so, in this age of the Church, a deeper spiritual darkness presses in to devour the faithful. That deep shadow of eternal death has attempted to swallow those whom God has named with His Name in every generation since that of our first parents.

With that, perhaps you can understand the wisdom shown in beginning the evening's readings with the true Word of Genesis. And, a few of you perhaps, also grasped the tie between the readings chosen 98 years ago for the Eve of the Nativity and the more ancient selections for the Eve of the Resurrection? Both Holy Saturday and Christmas Eve begin with readings from Genesis. Why might that be? What moved the ancients, and 19 centuries later, the moderns to tie the events at the creation to the events at the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God? Check your personal images of the Christ Child against those of Scripture, and the Church. The answers to this evening's questions are best found in those places. Consider the Church's teaching drawn from the Scriptures.

Some of you may be able to think back to the old frontal that used to hang upon this Altar Table during the Advent season. It was blue – a color of the blessed Virgin. That blue was also used to symbolize the hope of the Spanish (Mozarabic Rite) Advent readings. Those had changed the ancient penitential Advent season into something focused solely on joy. Advent had become for some a sort of pre-Christmas. On that blue background was the image of a golden cradle, with a gold nimbus (halo) arching over the head end. In addition, and most importantly, a powerful reminder of why the Christ had

to become incarnate in human flesh – to be true God and true Man in one person – a black cross rose over the cradle.

Others may have seen images of the Holy Family with the guiding star depicted above them as they were in a manger. In the middle of a four-pointed star, with the bottom ray reaching to earth, there is an outline of Christ on the cross. Manger and cross are irrevocably tied – in the revealed Mind of God for eternity – and in human minds since the mid-first century A.D. You are free to look to the night sky during the twelve days of Christmas this year and imagine such a Christ-crucified star guiding you to the Savior Who came to die to free you from your sins.

A few of you may have beheld pictures of the most ancient written icon known to be in existence. It has been dated back to the early 300s A.D. It was written (painted) upon oil flasks offered for sale to religious pilgrims at the first Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. That image was allowed in the Church on account of Jesus' own testimony – as are all images of Christ and those who held to their public confession of Him as God and Man Who was born to die to set God's people free from their sins. He is, after all, the living image of the eternal Father. He declared that anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father in heaven (*John 14:9*). The Holy Family ancient icon is a reflection of the Truth contained in these words:

The people dwelling in darkness, they see Great Light, upon the ones dwelling in a land of deep darkness, light has shined (Isaiah 9:2 (1)).

In the middle of the 17-century-old icon, the infant Christ is depicted wrapped in white. What appear first to be swaddling cloths, are, in reality, grave windings. The Babe of Bethlehem reclines in a manger trough. It is curiously shaped – it could also be a wooden coffin. Around the infant child is deep darkness – of a manger cave which also could be beheld as a Garden Tomb. The Baby Jesus' light in the center presses back the darkness. He shines forth as the center of attention.

Just below him is Mother Mary. She gazes down to Joseph in love and understanding. He bows his head in the lower corner of the icon, showing his doubt – for

the devil, depicted as a shepherd with a crooked staff stands before him. (In the birth of Jesus, Satan's power begins to become bent. In Jesus' death, Satan's rule over the faithful is removed). The deceiver of man appears to taunt Joseph. Perhaps, we may surmise, he uses reminders that Joseph is too old to be a father to the Child, and that a virgin has never conceived and bore a child. (Those lies appear, still being held forth in places that will also remember the Nativity of our Lord this day).

Above the Manger-Tomb-Cave there is a Mandorla – a golden circle of light. From it, toward the Infant Son of God and His mother, extend one beam that puts forth three rays. This represents the undivided essence of God. To the upper right angels – human in form – are depicted singing. Below them, a shepherd is shown blowing a horn. They are announcing the Gospel into the world – the Savior is born; ancient prophecy is fulfilled; the Great Light of God has illumined the darkness, as Isaiah's words can be seen to ring out:

*For (a) Child is born to us, (a) Son is gifted to us, and it will be, the government, upon His shoulder. His Name will be called:
Wonder;
Counselor;
Mighty El;
Eternal Father;
Prince (of) Shalom (Isaiah 9:6 (5)).*

The faithful among us who will come to the Midnight Christ-Mass will hear more concerning those Names. Even now, the Confirmands in this congregation are preparing to confess the Faith of Jesus. Their sermon will pick up on their confession of the One Who bears those throne names eternally.

Even so, we now rejoice in the Gift God gave to us in sending His Son into our flesh. We remember that the Eternal Light came into the world to drive back the darkness. God, in the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took on our flesh, to be born of a virgin, to live the perfect life, to die the death of sinners while having no sin in Himself. God humbled Himself for sinners, for you, that He might lift you up in Him.

That is our good confession of the Faith of Jesus the Christ, whose Advents and Nativity we, with all the true Church celebrate for the right, biblical and churchly reasons this night, in this fallen world. Let us continue to celebrate the Light of Life as the building lights dim, the candles begin to glow, and the beautiful words of the hymn sound forth into the world. Then, as we depart, we are free to remember that we are empowered to greet one another with ancient words of blessing: Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night in the eternal light of the Christ that drives back the darkness of sin and death.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Eve of the Nativity (Lessons and Carols)

Genesis 3:8-15; Genesis 22:8-15; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:1-9;
Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2: 1-7; Luke 2:8-16; Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:1-14

December 24, 2015

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Solī Deo Gloria