

## Christmas Night (B)

(Isaiah 9:1-7 / Titus 2:11-14 / Luke 2:1-14)

24.12.2014

There is an Irish tradition of lighting a candle and placing it at the window of one's house (usually above the front door) to signal that there is room for Christ in the household displaying this sign of welcome.

I remember how a brother at Bec spotted such a candle at the window of my cell (away back in the 1980's) and wondered about its meaning. When I explained its significance to him, he also took on the practice of burning a candle near the window of his cell. He is here tonight. I suspect there is a candle burning at the window of his room in this monastery.

The little candle I have burning near my window tonight is one I brought back from a day pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Reformers in Geneva in November past, after preaching a retreat to a community of Cistercian nuns in Switzerland.

I spent a long moment in that great Calvinist Centre *la Cathédrale St Pierre* where Calvin preached twice every Sunday and twice a day alternate weeks.

A large part of the time I spent there I sat under the pulpit, looking at the Communion Table on which the words *Post Tenebras Lux* are inscribed.

*Post Tenebras Lux* means *After Darkness Light*.

The area of the cathedral where I sat for that hour or so is fairly dimly lit (at least it was on that November day) but when I then made my way from the main body of the cathedral into what is called *la Chapelle des Maccabees* what a contrast! This area of the cathedral which for a long time the Reformers left unused is a very bright and coloured area. There on the wall above the pulpit one reads again the words *Post Tenbras Lux*, but what catches one's eyes in this sacred space is above all the brightness, the colour, the light.

Clearly, Calvin's desire was to bring the light of the gospel to bear on the darkness of people's lives. This same desire inhabits the heart of every Christian witness, whatever their tradition. Calvin preached the gospel in the city of Geneva at what could be classified as a harsh and difficult period of history, at a time of great suffering and darkness for many. The reality of today's world is not that different to that of Calvin's time: harshness, difficulties, suffering, darkness are not unknown to our contemporaries and even to ourselves. Many of us who are gathered here tonight have our own burdens to bear and may be feeling the weight of those burdens acutely unbeknown to those around us.

At Christians we are called not only to look to the light of Christ, but *to be children of the light*. We are called to be men and women who reflect the radiance of Christ to all around us. If Jesus is *the bright morning star*, the apostle reminds us that we are also called *to live in this darkened world as bright shining stars*.

We are called to point others to Jesus, who says of Himself: *I am the light of the world*. We are called to transmit the light of the gospel to our brothers and sisters in humanity. We are called to proclaim Jesus as the One who brings *light out of darkness* and who gives hope to suffering people. We are called to receive for ourselves the grace Christ offers and to share the blessing of His healing power with all our brothers and sisters, reserving special attention to those we know to be the most vulnerable, those wounded or hurting in one way or another.

For Calvin this is what expository preaching was and should be all about. It is this insight that filled him with the conviction that preaching the gospel was the central labour of his life.

While few of us who are gathered here tonight are called to be preachers of the gospel in the formal

sense, by which I mean to stand up in a pulpit to preach, all of us are called to proclaim the Good News of Christ to the whole world and to do this by our whole way of being. We are sent forth at the end of each Eucharist with a mandate to announce the gospel of the Lord, to proclaim its message, glorifying the Lord by our whole way of life. We glorify the Lord and make His presence manifest by doing whatever we can to bring words of love, joy and peace into this harsh, sad and troubled world.

The transforming power of the gospel of Christ which we are called to channel to others brings hope into despair, light into darkness, life to what is dead.

Isaiah's prophecy (our first reading taken from Isaiah chapter 9), is the text which has stopped our attention tonight. We believe this prophecy to have found fulfilment in Christ-Jesus. Isaiah's words are a wondrous proclamation of God's compassionate love for His suffering people.

It is surely because of Isaiah's strong insistence throughout his ministry upon the redeeming, life-restoring, freeing, healing love of God that Jesus inaugurated His preaching mission in Nazareth by having recourse to words from this prophetic book. We are told that he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read it and before sitting down said to the people: *These words are being fulfilled today before your every eyes.*

During Advent we listened to Isaiah practically every day. Tonight we are invited to see the fulfilment of all Isaiah's prophetic promises to have been realised in Christ-Jesus whose birth we celebrate. Isaiah's message, taken up and shown to have found accomplishment in the gospels, invites to move beyond certain temptations into which we can all so easily fall individually and collectively (even as Church, as Churches): the temptations of hopelessness and pre-occupation with self.

The Word of God assures us that beyond the many real dramas with which we are constantly confronted in life (not least the final drama of death) light and life await us: the life and light of Christ! With Christ what we are promised is not only light beyond the darkness, but even light within it. Christ is our light *in* the darkness.

God's light which shines upon us this night through Christ's coming to us in our Midnight Eucharist is not just a hope for tomorrow. It is a reality for us right now. In the middle of the night in which we find ourselves the very life of God is shared with us in Christ-Jesus.

The really staggering conviction that we are called to make our own and inhabit with all our being tonight, as we contemplate God made man in the little child of Bethlehem, is that through the birth of this infant - this poor, fragile, vulnerable little child who is the Christ - we are drawn into the very life of God.

Let me end by quoting just a few lines from a longer text by a 10th/11th century saint, Symeon the New Theologian. These words were shared with me by a friend during my Advent journey. I am happy to offer the insight and assurance they offered me then as a gift to all of you tonight.

The first line from Symeon's text is an invitation:

*Let yourself receive the one  
who is opening to you so deeply.*

Symeon the New Theologian goes on:

*For if we genuinely love Him,  
we wake up inside Christ's body, where all our body, all over,  
every most hidden part of it,  
is realised in joy as Him*

*and He makes us utterly real,  
and every thing that is hurt, everything  
that to us seemed dark, harsh, shameful,  
maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged,  
is in Him transformed*

*and recognised as whole, as lovely,  
and radiant in His light.*

*We awaken as the Beloved  
in every last part of our body.*

***We awaken as the Beloved.***

It seems to me that those words send us back to the Introit sung at the beginning of this celebration;

*Dominus dixit ad me: filius meus es tu.  
Ego hodie genui te.*

*The Lord said to me you are my son (my child, my beloved).  
This day have I begotten you.*

May we take those words to heart as words addressed to us this night. May we lie die to rest after this celebration recognising how much God has blessed us in Christ and may we awaken to the new day of Christmas with a deep assurance in our hearts that we are God's Beloved.

Amen!