

Light in the World

Let me begin this morning by quoting an understanding about the book of Isaiah as a whole. Clearly it is a very significant book written in a particularly impressive way.

The Book of Isaiah, comprising 66 chapters, is one of the most profound theological and literarily expressive works in the Bible. Compiled over a period of about two centuries (the latter half of the 8th to the latter half of the 6th century bce), the Book of Isaiah is generally divided by scholars into two



(sometimes three) major sections, which are called First Isaiah (chapters 1-39), Deutero-Isaiah (chapters 40-55 or 40-66), and—if the second section is subdivided—Trito-Isaiah (chapters 56-66).

The nature of the writing is such that unless one can allow imagery to inform their reading, an understanding of the text will elude them. Not only does metaphor appear over and over again, it is also heavily endowed with allusion. Thus as light (of the world) is alluded to, there are immediate allusions to:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.¹

Beginning with a formless darkness, like a rising sun, the presence of God floods the darkness with new light. A new day is begun.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.²

The people of God are the carriers of light. They are to flood the dark and difficult places with light. The concept of 'Light Of The World' will go hand in hand with God's entry into his creation. God's people are to be an incarnational people. That is, they will be a people through whom God will make himself known to the world.

Many years ago, while still a teenager, Myself and a friend, decided to hitch-hike from Hamilton, where we lived, to Wellington, where we were desirous of being. In the late 1950s, hitch-hiking was still an acceptable form of travel. People would readily stop to pick you up. Usually, it would take about six hours for the trip we were planning.

For an eighteen year old who had not at that time been reshaped by a higher education, what was about to unfold was not something I had the skills to reflect on. The night would be firmly etched into my mind, but it would another twenty years before I would have the training

¹ Genesis 1: 1-5

² Matthew 5:14-16

necessary to be able to understand metaphor and theological reflection. When I did, tentatively venture into theological reflection, I discovered a treasure chest full of metaphor and allusion.

On this particular trip to Wellington, things didn't go to plan. By midnight, we were only at Turangi. It was a bitterly cold night and traffic was very light. We decided that we would make a nest for the rest of the night. That meant, wrapping ourselves up in the extra clothing we were carrying, and literally throwing ourselves into brush and scrub at the side of the road. You then wriggle your way into a comfortable position where you are safe from the cutting wind.

Unfortunately, it began to snow very heavily. Wrapped though we were, the cold made it's presence felt and we were confronted by the reality that we were at risk of hypothermia. Although we had in fact slept for a few hours, we now needed to address that risk.

We left our nests and began a highly imaginative process in which we imagined that we were some kind of primitive natives, dancing around an imaginary fire. The activity certainly worked. We regained bodily warmth, but as dawn broke the next morning, a remarkable thing began to happen. The snowing had stopped and as the light began to appear, the sky was cloudless. The rising sun was unimpaired. The very place that had been for us a place of peril, now became flooded with light and warmth. What had been a place of danger, now flooded with light and warmth, became a place safety.

If you can grasp the concept of metaphor in this incident, then perhaps you might find added depth of insight, in this following clip.

The call of the prophet Isaiah in this passage is spoken to encourage a dispirited people to see God’s transformative light coming just over the horizon and to imagine that when that light breaks over Zion, the city will be radiant, filled with the glory of God. Metaphorically light is the power of God to break through the increasing despair of those who had returned from exile to a world that Second Isaiah promised would be verdant but that in reality was marked by poverty and famine. In this world, the author of Third Isaiah offers a vision of what will be—an apocalyptic vision in which abundance and honor will replace poverty and shame. Not only will all nations honor the restored Zion, but the light of God that the city reflects will attract the abundance of the natural world.³

We do not speak often enough about the power of theological imagination in the work of hope. Theological imagination is not frivolous fantasy. Rather, it is marked by the courage, the faith, and the wisdom to imagine and call forward the world God desires us to make—a world in which the light of God radiates through us as individuals and as a nation. The work of the prophet/preacher is not to paint impossible pictures for others, because these will surely fail. Rather, their task is to be the first voice to crack through the paralysis of despair, loneliness, selfishness, greed, and all other limiting conditions, to break open in us a place for God’s light. She is the one to announce, “Arise and shine, for your light has come.” In the case of the Epiphany, hope is prepared for by the word of the prophet calling his people to stand and face a different future. Theological imagination is a tool of the prophet, the preacher, and the teacher willing to address her people in their suffering and to help them open themselves to God’s light.⁴

³ ASKEW, EMILY, “Theological Perspective on Isaiah 60:1-6”, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2010) I, 194.

⁴ ASKEW, EMILY, “Theological Perspective on Isaiah 60:1-6”, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2010) I, 196.

All people, at some time or another, have profound experiences. Sadly, not all people are able to engage in theological reflection, and thus be able to name these experiences as God moments. I have many times witnessed such moments, only to hear the person who experiences them, delve into their cultural philosophies and name them something else.

If we use the language of faith however, there is a particular richness of imagery. Jeremiah, for instance, came to say:

This is what the LORD Almighty says:

“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.”⁵

Paul in Athens, is confronted by the issue of mis-naming. He sees a monument to an unknown god.

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”⁶

In the hope that I have raised the significance of the image of appearing light, we now return to Isaiah 60.

⁵ Jeremiah 23:16

⁶ Acts 17:22-23

*60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

*2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.*

*3 And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.⁷*

The light of life has risen upon the people of Israel, but darkness⁸ pervades the earth. The redemptive light of God however, not only embraces the faithful in love, but it also radiates outward. The darkness is overwhelmed as people are drawn to the enfolding love.

So it reads for Israel. What about us today?

When I reflect on that significant night following which I then experienced the rising sun, I also find myself re-engaging with Isaiah yet again. I sense a time in which I was gifted a God moment, not for me to personally keep and cherish, but rather to radiate into the darkness that surrounds us here today. The conquest of the darkness, is no small task. It requires gifted faith and strong courage. Isaiah once again is the prophet who hears God calling.

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send?
And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"⁹*

That is Precisely how we also need to respond. "Here I am, send me!"

⁷ Isaiah 60:1-3

⁸ Darkness in this sense, is separation from God. The realm of evil persists.

⁹ Isaiah 6:8