

\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John 1:6-8 (NRSV)

\*\*\*\*\*

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” This Bible Verse from John Chapter 1 is a familiar refrain often spoken by people as they light an Advent Candle at Devotion time. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” This is a great verse for children to learn from a young age, and with simply lighting the Advent Candles we point to a very deep and comforting reality for us as Christians. Have you shared this Bible Verse before with your family? Can you see the value in this?

When we come to the Holy Gospel for this day (the account of John the Baptist according to John the Evangelist), there is something very important happening here that speaks to the deep realities of our lives, and the world in which we live. John the Evangelist’s (the writer of the Gospel) is speaking about John the Baptist, who is ‘witnessing’ to something really important: “the Light”. When we look at the other Gospel Accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke) John the Baptist is described as one who ‘baptises’. But here ‘John the Baptist’ is the one who ‘witnesses’ to Jesus. And John the Evangelist says of John the Baptist, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

The John of John’s Gospel is never called the Baptist. Rather, this is John the Witness. While he is described as doing some baptising, a careful read of John’s story of Jesus’ baptism reveals that John does not baptise Jesus. His primary role is not as one who baptises, but one who witnesses to the light coming into the world through Jesus.

When one reads the Gospel according to Saint John (John the Evangelist), we hear John (the Evangelist) speak of John the Baptist in terms of who he is not — he is not the light, nor is he “Elijah” from the Gospel of Mark. But in a strange way, John is answering the question of “Who are you?” with “I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah.” In these negatives John identifies himself by his relationship with Jesus. Whereas Jesus defines himself as “I AM,” John is clear to say, “I am not.” He is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. He is not the light that shines in the darkness. And so in his resolute claims about who he is not John is pointing us very strongly to Jesus.

The John of the Third Sunday of Advent is the John that points to Jesus and says, “Behold, did you see Him? He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.” And the question we can then ask ourselves is, “What difference does this make?”

When it come to our celebrations of Jesus' birth, it is helpful to remember that in the Northern Hemisphere— in the midst of darkest and the shortest days of the year – festivals of light were essential. And so John's about Jesus – that the light of the world is continually shining when darkness should prevail – speaks to a fundamental human need for light.

Think about the tragedies and difficulties of your life: the death of a loved one, an illness, a divorce, guilt, the sin that separated you from God, others, and yourself. You know so often that our human 'answers' and 'explanations' often don't sustain us. "How?", "When?", "What?", or "Why?" are so often what we really do not need to hear to bring comfort to our soul. We may be able to "explain" things to ourselves, or 'rationalise" them in some way. But a finite human 'logic', or 'human hope' does not truly get us through. It may dull the sense, or direct us elsewhere. But it does not bring true comfort to our souls. .

It is the Word of Christ, the Word of hope that gets us through it all. The Gospel of John is highly philosophical and used philosophical categories of his day such as "life" and "light." In the Gospel of John, the word, "life," is used 36 times and the word, "light," is used 22 times. Similarly, light is contrasted with darkness. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Jesus shines in the dark world. Darkness could not overcome Jesus. This is a word of hope.

Now what we need to remember here also is that "Hope" does not make life easy. "Things" (in terms of many of the circumstances of our lives) won't automatically change. But true and eternal hope does make life (and living this life) possible. Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. Indeed, this light in Christ Jesus is already here among us.

It is also helpful here for us to remember that when John the Baptist was at work in 'the wilderness', there were those who came to 'interrogate' him. They came to question who he was. They sought attention elsewhere. This is the way it so often is for us as well today. There are the interrogators of our soul (our own dark and melancholic thoughts, or those around us who really wish to 'bring us down') who seem to 'question' the 'destiny' of our souls. These interrogators of the world often make it difficult to hear that other voice, the witness of hope. The interrogators clamour and compete for our attention. They often speak the loudest. But the voice of hope has never been silenced.

Which voice do we listen to? Which voice do we follow? Those are questions we must answer every day. The reality of humanity is that we are a people of the wilderness. And in this 'reality' of our lives, there is another 'reality' we are to remember: this is the "reality" that God is the God of hope. And so we should ask ourselves: Do we trust "the voice of the wilderness" or do we trust "the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness"? The voice we listen to is the voice with which we will speak. We will become either witnesses or interrogators.

Interrogators will look at and question the circumstances of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. Are the circumstances right for rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks? Is there reason for those things? They want answers, justifications, and reasons. Witnesses, however, look beyond the circumstances to the God who fills

those circumstances. That is hope. It opens our eyes to see the one who is coming. It prepares our heart to welcome the one who is already among us. It makes straight the way of the Lord. Hope is not a feeling but an orientation and attitude of our life. It is a way of seeing. It allows us to recognise and know Jesus. Hope does not change the circumstances of our life it changes us and that changes everything.

Here it is also important to remember that “The Word” and “The Life” and “The Light” are coming into the world. But they are not going to conquer this darkness the way a bolt of lightening brightens the night. Yes, this is the story of Christmas night. But we live in the days after Christmas. And so “The Light of Christ” will conquer the darkness by lighting millions and millions of people with gospel. And that gospel also comes through human witnesses around us.

A person in the late 1800s once wrote a song called “Never Alone.” It says,

“I’ve seen the lightning flashing, I’ve heard the thunder roll.  
I’ve felt sin’s breakers dashing, which almost conquered my soul.  
I’ve heard the voice of my Saviour, bidding me still to fight on.  
He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone!  
No, never alone, no never alone,  
He promised never to leave me, He’ll claim me for His own;  
No, never alone, no never alone.  
He promised never to leave me, Never to leave me alone.”

Christians are not without faith. We have faith in God. We may not be able to explain what it is, but we know we are not without faith. Hebrews says, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” We are not without faith.

Christians are not without hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13, says, “I do not want you to be uninformed, my brothers and sisters, about those who have died, because I do not want you to grieve as those who have no hope.” We are not without hope. Now ‘Hope’ is not easy. We must practice hope. It means we rejoice always, we pray without ceasing, we give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). These practices enable us to both hear and become the voice of hope.

Christians, also, are not without love. “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Romans 8 also tells us that in Christ Jesus absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God. We are not without love. Christians are not condemned. John 3:17 says, “For God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

Christians are not lost. We may be like sheep who wander after grass until they do not know where they are, but the Bible says we have a Good Shepherd. That Shepherd will leave the ninety and nine and come to find us! And that Shepherd knows the way home. He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” We are not lost! We are not alone, not afraid, not without faith, not without hope, not without love, not lost and not condemned. That tells who we are!

In John the Evangelist's Gospel, before there is "the Word made flesh", there is the promise that in the midst of all of the darkness of humanity, light will shine.

This is who the light is: Jesus the Christ. He is the light of the world, who brings the light of God into our sin-darkened world. He, Jesus, illumines our minds to see the truth about God and ourselves. Christ brings light and life into this world of darkness and death. He is the Word made flesh, the Son of God come from God, full of grace and truth. He makes God known to us. And this is who John the Baptist came to bear witness to. John's whole purpose in life is that you would believe in Christ. "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him." John does that again here today in our text. He testifies to Christ, in order that you may believe.

What does it mean to testify to the light? Do we imagine ourselves as witnesses to the light as the first expression of God's presence in the world? Do we think of ourselves as witnesses to the light which shines in the darkness? Into the bleakness of winter will soon come the light of the world. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

John the Baptist was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John the Baptist was not the light but pointed to the light. And we are the same: we point to the greatest light in the whole world, Jesus. Jesus is that great and glorious beacon that guides us on our way. Jesus is the North Star who guides us in the night. Jesus is our lamp who guides our feet so we don't stumble and fall as we walk on the paths of life.

In these glorious ways, Jesus is the light of the world. If you follow Him now, you will have Him as your light in advance of that great day. True, He will reveal your sins, which is a precious gift (like a fortunate early diagnosis of a deadly cancer). But even more, He will reveal all that is beautiful. He will be the light in which you see God. He will be the light in which you see mountains and valleys and oceans and rivers and trees and animals and people. Nothing will be the same again when you have Him as your light. Everything looks different in the light of Christ.

The light brings new life. It shines in on the darkness. It wakes the world up and brings warmth to the cold. Jesus came into the world to bring new life. He shines in on the darkness of our soul and gives us hope. When we follow Jesus that darkness no longer can overcome us. He is the light that brings new life. Will you allow the light of Jesus to shine on your life by allowing Him to come into you? Will you give a place for the "hope of glory" to reside in you? If you will, then His life that gives light will start changing you. Allow the light of Christ to shine in every area of your heart today. It can overcome anything in your life you are struggling with. Receive and walk in that new life today. Amen.

*Dear Jesus, thank You for sharing in our experience and shining in our darkness. Help me not to hide from Your light but to come to You, to welcome You, to trust in You, to discover help and healing in You. May the light of Your love shine through me, to others, for Your praise and glory. Amen.*