
¹ But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time He brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time He has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Isaiah 9:1-2

Have you ever had the experience of being lost? For example, you were driving somewhere and you ended up somewhere you didn't know. Interesting in these situations is sometimes someone in the car may feel lost ("Where are we... don't know where we are..."), and someone else may say, "No, we aren't lost.... We know where we have come from, we know where we are going, and I have an idea where we are..." There can be other situations where we may 'feel lost' – for example, a child who wanders away from a parent in a shopping centre, or a person at University for the first time (not knowing where to go), and the like.

Being lost can be a terrifying experience for some people. A person's head spins as panic creeps up, shouting threats like, "You'll never find your way!" or "It's impossible!" Fear clutches at you.

Of course, the phrase 'lost' may not apply to a 'physical situation', but an emotional state of life. For example, a person once wrote of feeling lost whilst washing dishes. She said, "Exactly how much time had I spent in front of the sink over the years with my hands in hot, soapy water, running circles over a plate with a rag or twisting it inside then outside a dirty cup? Even on that sunny afternoon, when there wasn't anything particular to cry about, a tear escaped from the corner of one eye. I felt lost. Lost in the middle of my own life." Have you ever felt 'lost' in your own life, and left behind? One person once asked, "Did you ever feel like the whole world was going to a party and your invitation got lost in the mail?"

Several strange things are true about being lost. One is that we can think we really aren't when we are. Sincerity is no guarantee we're on the right road. Furthermore, we don't have to be alone to be lost. We can be surrounded by a lot of folks. Also, we can't trust our feelings or our hunches to solve our dilemma. We need help from something or someone outside ourselves. A map. A person who knows the way. Whatever or whoever . . . we must have accurate assistance.

In our Scriptures for today (Isaiah 9:1-4), Isaiah speaks to a people who were 'lost', but who didn't know it. He spoke of a 'people who walked in darkness'.

The Historical context here is Isaiah of Jerusalem's ministry was in the latter half of the 8th Century BC (around (742-700 BC) Isaiah saw the Assyrian invasions and the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And he was concerned with the threat the Assyrians posed to the South. In 734, the Assyrian armies marched around Israel and Judah along the coast to cut off any assistance from Egypt to the south, and then turned back north to deal with Israel. By 733 the Assyrians had taken most of the coastal areas, the northern territories of Israel and surrounding areas including Zebulun and Naphtali around the Sea of Galilee, and were poised to take Samaria, the northern capital (2 Kings 15:29). It is against this background of the decimation of the northern territories of Israel that Isaiah 9 lies. The Southern Kingdom was having its own problems both with Assyria and with its own leaders. At just about the time that Israel lost Zebulun and Naphtali and the other northern territories, Ahaz came to power in Judah in the South. He proved to be a weak ruler who had no intention of returning the nation to the proper worship of God. Ahaz had not heeded Isaiah's warnings, and because Ahaz had refused to respond to God's word, the prophet described the bleak future awaiting Judah in metaphors of darkness. And yet into this situation the prophet Isaiah says: "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish... The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of darkness a light has dawned.

Everyone knows about darkness in life. 'Darkness' can refer to people whose circumstances in life are any thing but bright, positive and optimistic, and this kind of darkness differs from one person to the next.

For another person 'darkness' is struggling with an illness, the aches and pains of old age, losing the struggle with failing abilities and entering a nursing home. For some darkness is the inevitable day when they lose a loved one through death.

The 'darkness' may also refer to poverty, hunger and homelessness. It may be the sense of hopelessness for one who lives in a land of war.

'Darkness' can refer to relationship difficulties, home life difficulties, the weight of some terrible experience in the past, a sense of frustration with one's employment in the present, or a fear about possible futures. And there is also the darkness of sin.

Make no mistake there is darkness inside us all. The question here is: How does darkness manifest itself in your life? The prophet Isaiah knew about 'darkness'. Isaiah had seen the 'darkness' of the sin of his own people, and their unbelief and rejection of God. And Isaiah was alive when the Assyrians over ran the Northern kingdom of Israel and deported the majority of the ten tribes of Israel to countries which Assyria had defeated. Isaiah knew this as God's judgement on sin.

But God has sent His light into the world to save us. Jesus tells us, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” It was God’s will that Jesus suffer and die for the sins of the world. Jesus carried out His Father’s will, wiping out debt of sin to God and bringing us out of the darkness of sin.

Isaiah said “There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.”

Remember where Jesus carried out a significant portion of his earthly ministry? It was in Galilee! He performed his first miracle at Cana in Galilee. He resided at Capernaum in Galilee. He preached and taught and performed miracles in the regions around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus brought the light of the gospel to the people living in darkness.

This is the good news of the gospel. The news that God sent his light and it is a light that shines out of the darkness. Just as the shining of the sun chases away the darkness of night so also does God’s light shine out for us all.

As a reading after Epiphany, this text calls us to live in the light of Jesus. And the real question for us is whether we will choose to walk in that light or to sit in the darkness. This is a choice to live in the reality of God’s future. This is a choice as to how we shall live as God’s people.

In the latter half of the 17th Century Isaac Newton, whilst drinking tea in a garden, saw an apple fall to the ground. He started thinking about why it fell, and finally concluded that the same force which caused the apple to fall also kept the moon in orbit around the earth. This same force, gravity, also kept the planets in orbit around the sun. The apple incident led to his three basic laws of motion: An object in motion tends to remain in motion unless an external force stops it; an object moves in a straight line unless some force diverts it; and for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. For Newton this was an ‘enlightening’ experience’

Newton’s conception of the universe based upon Natural and rationally understandable laws that became the seed for Enlightenment ideology. But although the laws of motion and universal gravitation became Newton's best-known discoveries, he warned against using them to view the universe as a mere machine, as if akin to a great clock. He said, "Gravity explains the motions of the planets, but it cannot explain who set the planets in motion." But the unforeseen theological consequence for some of Newton’s conception of God was that God was removed from the world’s affairs.

Where is your ‘light’ for life that guides you...? Isaiah predicted that, “ in the future God will honour Galilee of the Gentiles... the people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” This very passage was quoted when Jesus – after his temptation of the devil in the desert and the arrest of John – left

Nazareth and went to Naphtali and Zebulun - Galilee of the Gentiles. These place, scorned by the Jews, ended up having God Himself make a special visit very early in His ministry.

Jesus comes into your dark and dreary land. He says, "I have come to live and to die for you. I have come to erase your shameful past, and to use my blood to make you look pure and holy in My sight. I did this not just by taking on human flesh, but by actually being bathed in your sins on the cross." With your baptism He says, "I want you to be my child."

The apostle John tells us that the Light is Jesus; that He is the True Light which comes into the world (John 1:9-13). The description of Jesus as the Light shining in the darkness is a most appropriate description of the Saviour and His gospel. To Galilee of the Gentiles, and to us 21st-century Australians of the pre-occupied, God of God and Light of Light comes. He who was begotten of His Father, even before "let there be light" was ever uttered, comes preaching repentance. He shines His light into the dark, hidden crevices of your soul. He walks alongside the waters He created, splashes some on you, and with His word He says, "Follow Me."

Burdened and oppressed though you may feel, weighed down by the bar across your shoulders and struck down by the rod across your back, you need not stumble in the darkness. Let the light of the nations come to you. Let the light of His love and grace and mercy shine upon you, and it will shine within you, too. He's called you out of darkness, and into His marvellous light. Follow Him, and walk in His light, rejoicing in Jesus all the way. Amen.