

The Light Shines in the Darkness

Epiphany

This year, last Friday, January 7th, was Christmas in the Eastern Orthodox Church. They celebrate Christmas according to the calendar established by Julius Caesar, while we use the Gregorian calendar, established by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582.

For the Eastern Church a big event is Epiphany, which for them this year falls on January 19th. We need to remind ourselves how large the Eastern Church is. They are the second largest body of Christians in the world. Roman Catholics are the largest. There are about 1.4 billion of them, and there are about 300 million Eastern Orthodox. The third largest group are the Anglicans at about 75 million. And the fourth are the Lutherans at about 70 million.

In the secular Eastern world, for example, in Russia, celebrating the New Year is the big event. But in the Eastern Church Epiphany is a major festival, a big event. It is not something that we celebrate in a big way unless it falls on a Sunday, just as we also more or less ignore the Ascension, which occurs forty days after Easter Sunday but never on a Sunday itself.

Epiphany is the festival time when the Eastern Church celebrates the coming of the light, the Baptism of Jesus, and how everything has changed because of the Christ child.

We need to remember that what we call Christmas was not regularly celebrated in the first centuries of the church. In fact, it wasn't regularly celebrated in the Western Church until 336 AD. The earliest festival, the one that has been there from the beginning, is Epiphany, the celebration of the coming of the light.

As we know, sunlight begins to increase on the 21th of December. Every day we get a few more minutes of sunlight. The light is coming and getting stronger. It is appropriate at this time of year, in this season of Epiphany, that we celebrate the coming of the light. The season of Epiphany varies in length and ends at Ash Wednesday. This year Ash Wednesday is late, not until March 2nd.

The gospel text for today is about the Baptism of Jesus, the light of the world. In that day, as in ours, there was confusion about the coming of the light and the meaning of the light.

Some years ago Paul Tillich, a famous German-American scholar, argued that we have a totally different problem today than at the time of the Reformation. At the time of the Reformation for Luther and others the question was: How do we find a gracious God? Tillich said that's no longer true; the question today is: Does God exist at all?

Even though Tillich died in 1965, he foresaw how science can become a religion. You may be familiar with the modern atheists Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the

late Christopher Hitchens. They have been prominent public voices attacking religion, mostly Christianity. They have even been referred to as the four horsemen of the non-apocalypse. For them the darkness is religion. Religion is superstition. It leads people astray. They use the word, "obscurantism," because religion, they claim, leads to obscurity.

Not only that, but they claim that science is the light. They claim that scientists are able to fulfill that ancient story in Greek mythology about Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven and gave it to the people on earth. They claim that because of modern science, we are now equal with the gods. In fact we're superior.

It's often the case in dealing with atheists today that you find out that they are often fundamentalists, even fanatic fundamentalists, as inclined to prophesy about the future as the most fundamentalistic, religious sect. Atheists today are really a very small part of the population. They go back into the Enlightenment in the Seventeenth Century. Despite their prominence, they are less than 5% of the population, and their percentage in the population since that time has not changed much.

But that doesn't mean that the rest of our population are believers. About 10% belong to some other religion: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and the like. But a large majority claim to be "spiritual." Not religious, but "spiritual." They say they believe in "God," as they envision God to be. It could be said that they believe in "godism." By "godism" I don't mean Deism, as in eighteenth-century Deism, a watchmaker God, which many of the founding fathers of this country held to. No, "godism" is the vague idea that there is something out there, and that I have my own way of being involved and being comforted. I am "spiritual" in the way that suits me.

Therefore there is no need to worry. What matters is that we try our best and that we affirm ourselves and others. We all know people like that. And yet this belief in "godism" is the spirit of the Anti-Christ. Rev 13:14 says the Antichrist is so much like Christ that most are deceived. The Anti-Christ seems like the light. The light of affirmation and do-goodism. This shouldn't surprise us. Luther often referred to Paul's warning in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

This is the false religion of "the god who suits me." Luther Seminary professor, Gerhard Forde, used to tell of how every semester a few students ask to transfer out of his classes because, as they said: "I don't like what you say about God; I have to have a God who suits me." And so they go looking for a god who suits them, rather than God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We live in an age of entitlement. I'm entitled to what suits me, and I know best. A tragic example of this mentality is found in the miracle of modern medicine. With modern genetic engineering and neo-natal surgery, one can correct many problems before a child is born. But that's not all that is happening today. A few years ago a deaf couple wanted their

doctor to use modern reproductive technologies to make sure that their child to be would also be deaf. They liked being deaf and felt they knew best what was best for any child they brought into the world.

The message of Epiphany is quite different. It is illustrated in the Gospel of John 1:4-5: "In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it ("did not comprehend it" KJV)." John 3:16-18 reads:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already."

The light is in conflict with the darkness. **The Gospel of John 1:5 is the same as the Letter of John 1:5**, where it states:

"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie, and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

In the Gospel of John 8:12, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." The Pharisees who were talking to him said: "How do you know that?" And in John 8:19 he answers: "If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (See also John 8:58, 10:30, 14:9).

That controversy in John 8 is followed in John 9 by the account of the man who was born blind. In the first part of that chapter, John 9:5, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world." But the chapter ends with the astonishing paradox in 9:38: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who are blind may see, and those who see may become blind."

What!? It's a paradox. Those who think they see just fine, who think everything is fine, are really blind. And those who are blind, who know they walk in darkness and yet belong to the Lord and therefore the Father, see, really see.

We go back to John 1:4: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." That helps us to get a handle on what this is about. The text is not simply contrasting light and darkness. Or heavenly and earthly, or other such contrasts. Rather, it is playing on the difference between life and death.

We may be healthy now, but we will all die. Death indicates that we in ourselves do not have life, and we do not have light even though we may be deceived into thinking we do. John 1:4 says that in him was light and this light, which comes from outside of us, in spite of

us, and over against our darkness, is that which gives us life. The light comes to save us. Therefore we can sum this up in the words of Psalm 27:1: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid?"

That's the message of Epiphany. Amen.