SUNDAY AFTER THEOPHANY St Matt 4: 13-17

Last Thursday we celebrated the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan by his relative John the Baptist. The cross was thrust into the water in the font and after the church had been blessed with it those present were able to drink of the life-giving water and take it to their homes for their loved ones especially the sick. The troparion which is sung speaks of the revelation of the Holy Trinity and ends with the words, “O Christ our God, who has appeared and enlightened the world, glory to thee”. From the life-giving water which washes away our sins in repentance and causes us never to thirst, as Christ explains to the woman at Jacob’s well in Samaria, we come in today’s gospel to the kingdom of light. John in his gospel tells us that the Baptist “was not the light but came to bear witness to the light. The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world”. And today we read that the Lord fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah by going to live in the far north in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali toward the sea beyond the Jordan in what is today Lebanon or ancient Sidon, Galilee of the Gentiles. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and on those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned. The image of light is a very strong one. We are told unequivocally by Christ to “let our lights shine before men that they might see our good works and give glory to our father who is in heaven”. Let us look then at the various properties and characteristics of light to understand the image more clearly.

One purpose of light is to show us where we are going. Without it we are blind and cannot find our way. Christ speaks of himself as the Way, the earliest name for the community that followed him. These words apply to us in the deepest sense that apart from Christ we can be without a direction and a goal in both small and major areas of our lives, our careers, our marriages, our spiritual path. Another image of Christ is as a shepherd who guides us on our way and comes looking for us when we get lost or stray from the main flock.

Light also reveals or shows things to us especially what is hidden which includes reality and the truth. Not only hidden things in the world but in ourselves who we really are. We are told to plunge down into ourselves and discover the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven which lie deep within us waiting to be discovered. What joy there is when we find a pearl of great price which we never expected we had but there are also dark areas within us which we need to confront truthfully and courageously and confess honestly if we are to move forward. This is the cross that we carry in our earthly journey and knowing this humbly in the confident knowledge of God’s forgiveness will help us to forgive others as we are commanded to do.

Another property of light is power especially to make the created world live and grow in the world. At this time of year when we have passed the winter solstice but the days are still short we can begin to see that life emerging slowly in the garden and be comforted that spring is not far away. We move our plants around the house to feed them light according to how much they need. We see it at the scientific level where light can be harnessed to produce energy in solar cells and lasers. The light which Christ gives us individually and as members of his body, the Church, is paradoxical.

The Church often appears weak and helpless to the outside world as did the Apostles when they set out into the world in accordance with the Lord’s commandment to preach the Kingdom of Heaven and baptise those who believed the Word. But history confirms their monumental achievements over two thousand years later despite the fact that all but one were martyred. That power for us is evident in the mystery of Christ’s body received in simple bread and wine in communion, in the scriptures especially the Gospels, and in the other sacraments of the Church. St Paul asserts that when we are weak, then we are strong or the power of God is made perfect in weakness.

But the power of light reaches its peak in the transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor. The account says that his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. The icons show Peter, James and John falling down dazzled by the intensity of the light so that they cannot look. Similarly, we have an account in the life of St Seraphim of Sarov from a meeting in the forest in sub-zero temperature with his young friend. He tells him that the secret of life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit and to look at him. He responds sadly that he cannot because the light of his appearance is too bright. The Fathers tell us that this is the goal of all believers to reach the light of Tabor in our bodies. Not many of us will achieve this on this side of the grave but today’s dawning of the light of Christ’s presence in remote northern areas of Israel reminds us of the need to repent constantly, to take courage when we fall and to find new joy in his presence by drawing near to Him. May God grant us something of that experience as we watch Christ in the coming weeks bringing healing of soul and body as he reaches out to those who meet him in his earthly ministry.

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