



A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

An Advent Course based on the prophecies of Isaiah

Week 1

Light amidst the darkness

The child's fear of the dark is deeply rooted in the human psyche. The dangers that have surrounded human beings from earliest times were amplified by the absence of light. Without light, the apparent safety of a cave could erupt with unexpected dangers lurking in the shadows. The darkness of night and the darkness of winter were natural contexts for anxiety and fear. These deeply-felt anxieties fed not only the spiritual imagination, but found expression in the imagery of everyday life.

Essential, religious and everyday experiences work together to give rich levels of meaning to the vocabulary of light and darkness. This is seen powerfully in Christian faith and practice. The candles that at one level were merely a practical way of dispelling darkness and allowing priests to read the liturgy are also the signs of the presence of the Spirit, a symbol of the risen Christ, a tangible expression of the prayer of the heart.

The prophecy of Isaiah

It is the prophet Isaiah who uses the phrase 'a light to the nations'. In Isaiah 42. 6 he says, 'I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations;'

and in Isaiah 49. 6 he writes, 'I will give you as a light to the nations.' The prophet is recording what he understands to be the commission of God to his servant. Over the years there has been much discussion, and a considerable amount of ink used, in the attempt to identify who the servant is. The suggestions range from the prophet himself, or another individual, to the whole people of Israel. The early Church interpreted these passages as a prophecy about Jesus. In this it may have been following Jesus's own identification of himself with the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53; Luke 22. 37).

Jesus, the bringer of light

The future announced by the prophet was a long time in coming. In many ways, of course, it is still to come. But through the teaching and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians have come to believe that the New Age has at least been inaugurated.

GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

Introduction

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.

Isaiah 61. 1

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'

Luke 4. 18

The Christian message is summed up as 'gospel' or 'good news'. Jesus, we are told, came to proclaim good news. The disciples and apostles preached good news. The Church is committed to share good news.

But what is the good news? St Mark begins his gospel with these words: 'The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1. 1). Ask Christians today, and some will say that it is the good news of forgiveness and salvation that God offers us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: that, in fact, Jesus is the heart of the gospel.'

Others will see the heart of the good news in the way Jesus directs our attention to the needs of the poor and in God's continuing concern for the disadvantaged and the outcast. For them, the heart of the gospel is more to do with social action than with personal salvation.

Neither aspect is to be seen as exclusive one of the other; it is more a matter of emphasis. Each aspect will see Jesus as the key to the good news – what he did and what he said. Without reference to Jesus and what he did, social action can become merely a programme of good works without any specific reference to God. But without the application of faith in concern for social justice, belief in Jesus can become simply a matter of individual piety.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit
and open to us the treasures of God's word.
Grant us a readiness to listen
and an openness to learn;
that through the riches of your gifts
we may better understand the needs of the poor
and the good news to be proclaimed;
We ask this in the name of Jesus
who came as a light to the nations. Amen.

Readings

I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.

Psalm 140. 12

Give the king your justice, O God,
and righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice...
For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper,
he has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

Psalm 72. 1-2, 12-13

Who is like the Lord our God,...
he raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.

Psalm 113. 5, 7, 8

Points for reflection

1. How would you describe the gospel?
 - Following the 2011 census, it was suggested that poor people are more likely to be religious than the rich. Is the gospel to the poor the same as the gospel to the rich?
 - In what ways do you understand the gospel to be a spiritual message, and in what ways is it a social message?
 - In what ways does St Stephen's Church seek to proclaim the gospel?
2. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is reported as saying, 'Blessed are you who are poor.' In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'
 - How would you understand the difference?
 - In what sense might the 'poor' be happy or blessed?
 - Do you think Jesus is referring to now on earth or to the future in heaven?
3. Jesus said, 'You always have the poor with you.' Is poverty inevitable? If it is, is there any point in trying to do something about it?

Prayer

For the riches of God's gifts, we give thanks;
for his love and mercy, we give thanks;
for the promise of his Son, we give thanks.

For all who live in poverty of possessions, we pray to the Father;
for all who live in poverty of spirit, we pray to the Father;
for all who proclaim the gospel of hope, we pray to the Father.

You are invited to continue by saying the Lord's Prayer and to end with:

We look for the coming of the Lord of light, the Child of Bethlehem,
the protector of the poor.

Come, Lord Jesus.

