

Epiphany III - To be captivated by the light of Christ

Isaiah 9.1–4

1 Corinthians 1.10–18

Matthew 4.12–23

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.

It can be tempting to divide today's Gospel into two levels of reality. On one level is a clash of the cosmic forces of darkness and light beyond our comprehension. On the other level is the mundane reality of Jesus's life by the sea of Galilee with a group of fishermen plying their trade. We left trying to reconcile two separate images – like combining an abstract painting of shadow and light with a polaroid of ordinary life in a fishing town.

Salvador Dali in his painting the Christ of Saint John of the Cross depicts this duality in striking fashion. On the one hand, we are transported out of time and place to occupy a godlike perspective that looks down upon Christ crucified. Christ shines radiantly amid the surrounding darkness while hovering above the earth. His body ripples with muscular energy. The base of the cross touches the sky above the earth, infusing dark clouds with a portentous glow. On the other hand, at the same time, the viewer stands below the Cross, confronting a simple scene overlooking the still waters of a bay with a fishing boat and fishermen in the foreground and mountains in the background. This earthly setting draws inspiration from the real view of the

Mediterranean out of Dali's window in Catalonia. I have to confess I have mixed feelings about this painting. I find its blend of the perspectives of the eternal and the ordinary powerful but unsettling. The two realms are not properly integrated, the light is too abstract and dominant. It is hard to see how we can know the light of Dali's Christ in our own lives.

On closer inspection our scripture readings today offer a different, unified vision. Here the divine light is never separate from or threatens the good of our mundane existence. Thus, we hear the light of God streaming forth in the words of the prophet Isaiah against the hand of real oppressors. This light cascades across millennia through the real historical plight of the people of Israel. In our Gospel, its rays shimmer in the witness of John Baptist arrested for his stand against lethal corrupt power, and then it bounces off the waves of the sea of Galilee, resting in the encounter between Jesus and a group of Galilean fishermen. In Jesus, the divine light has become fully incarnate, human flesh. And now it crackles and sparkles in a scene solid with bodies alive with personality, craftsmanship, sweat, smelling of sea air and fish, brimming with religious and familial undercurrents. In this unremarkable context, everything is bathed with God's brightness shining out in the person of Jesus as he begins his public ministry, teaching repentance and calling his first disciples.

‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ With these words to Peter and Andrew, Jesus declares how we come to know the divine light in our lives. Jesus is not simply framing this call in terms familiar to his listeners. He is affirming the kind of knowledge these men have as fishermen. Theirs is a knowledge borne of immersion in real experience. The Gospel dwells tangibly on how they handle and maintain their nets. This involves a knowledge not only of a specific craft but attentiveness to a whole way of seeing and relating to world, place, times and seasons, the rhythms of the natural work and working patiently together for a unified purpose.

In our present age knowledge is often equated with information. The problem is information is readily detached from the real thing. However, much information you have about a person, it is not equivalent to actually meeting them and living alongside them. In fact, information and technology can be used as buffers to shield ourselves from real encounter and the demands it places on us.

By contrast Jesus calls his disciples to a knowledge that comes from intimate acquaintance with particular things, tasks, people and places which open up to God’s creative purposes. This requires dedication to what is beyond oneself and a willingness to be transformed.

The first disciples show a breath-taking openness to the divine that their lives as fishermen prepared them for but which they could never have anticipated. In a wonderful reversal these catchers of fish are

captured by the beauty of Jesus' person and respond immediately. They recognise in him the glory of the God who sustains all things. Suddenly their lives are flooded with a light that changes everything. What they have learnt about attending to particular as fishermen is elevated to a new way of knowing themselves and others in God. They are to put down their nets and help captivate others, freeing hearts and minds by sharing the beauty of God's light with them.

To follow Jesus as the first disciples did, to see the great light that shines in darkness, means sharing in the way God knows and loves human beings. In Jesus, the carpenter's son, God is the consummate craftsman, the perfect fisherman. He takes delight in the concrete specifics of human existence and sees in them a depth of promise and hope, of beauty, goodness and truth beyond our imagining. Think how often Jesus refers to farmers and shepherds in his parables. This delight in the particular belongs also to the eye of an artist, a poet, a lover, a spouse, a parent, a friend, those who hunger and thirst for justice. In fact, it lies at the heart of what it means to be fully human.

In our Eucharistic worship especially, we are continually brought back to encounter how the light of God's reality breaks upon us in the particular: in the voices of those reading scripture, in the proclamation of the Word here and now, in our prayers, in the sacrament received into your hands and mine, in those sitting next to us with whom we share communion, and by being sent out into our actual lives to share

the light of Christ's presence. Christ does not stand aloft in his abstract dazzling brightness but is the true light and life of human beings, a light which it is our human calling to share with others for the sake of the common good in this place, the healing of this and every nation, and the unique dignity of every person, of you and me, as crafted and known by God.

The people who sat in darkness have, indeed, seen a great light.

Amen.