

# CHRIST, THE LIGHT OF THE WHOLE WORLD

Sermon for Epiphany  
Sunday January 11, 2009

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"Arise, shine; for your light has come; and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

*Isaiah 60: 103*

Thus, with beautiful and powerful words of light, does the prophet Isaiah foretell the restoration of the nation of Israel before the world. Spoken to the people of God at a time when they have just returned from captivity in Babylon, in modern day Iraq, these are words of promise and comfort. They portray the age of the Messiah as an age of light, when the God of Israel would be recognized by all nations.

It was a natural thing for the early Christians to take these words from their scripture as prophecies of the birth of the one whom they saw as the light of the world, and to use them in the liturgies of the Incarnation. The story of the visit of the magi to the manger is a powerful and archetypal truth that rose from the soul of the early church, linking the birth of Jesus with the promises of Isaiah, foretelling a new spirit, a new light that would shine to the ends of the earth.

The designation of the visitors from the East as Kings, reflected in the Epiphany tradition, harkens back to this passage from Isaiah and our psalm for today. They are also known as "wise men"— but some translations also call them astrologers. They represented for the early Christians the wisdom of the East— of those nations foreign to Israel who understood the secrets of the heavens, and were able to read in them portents of the future.

The Epistle for today speaks of Paul's understanding that the gospel of Jesus reveals a spirit that carries beyond the narrow boundaries of the Jewish tradition to the gentiles, those who were outside of the covenant of God with Moses and Abraham. The images of sages from another culture traveling to the manger is an expression of an amazing truth, says Paul, unknown in former ages. This is the knowledge that the gifts of God extend beyond one narrow tribe to en-compass all of humanity.

That belief— that the Spirit of God is universal— is one which we need to hear again today within the context of our own times. Historical Christianity carried the message of the new light well beyond the boundaries of the Hebrews— but then through its accommodation to human nature, it created a new tribe, with new boundaries and new exclusions. Departing

from the open and self-giving love expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus, Christianity be-came an oppressive force, often converting others by the sword.

Today we are in a world divided by the great religions, with war and violence between extremists: Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Jews, Muslims and Hindus. The destructive divisions of religious tribalism remain, and are made worse with modern weapons technology. Fundamentalist warriors in the extremes of the faith are the cause of much human suffering, as we can see today unfolding in the Gaza Strip.

Christians are in need of a new mind set, a new approach, which takes the message of Epiphany seriously. This is a new day, with two thousand years of conflict and failure behind us. We are called now, not to force others within the boundaries of our historic faith, but to manifest in our being and in our behavior what the Gospel of John calls "the light that enlightens everyone", and is to be found in some measure in all of the world's religions.

In a book called *The River of Light*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner gives a beautiful image of an underlying source of the spirit of light, which flows from the depths of human experience and manifests itself in the mysticism of all of the world's religious faiths. He writes:

"A consciousness glistens within each creature and each creature's creation, even as it is guided by the hand of the One who spoke and the world came into being.— Creation is in us.— There is a realm of being that comes before us and follows after us. Streaming through and uniting all of creation — a blueprint underlying the cosmos."

This rabbi, speaking from his own tradition in words that echo the prologue of the Gospel of John, goes on to describe this source, this river of light, that originates in the depth of the human soul and rises in all of the great religions as the experience of oneness with the creator and openness to the world of the spirit.

In a book which is not his best known or most controversial, entitled *Into the Whirlwind*, Bishop Spong of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark reflects the thought of Rabbi Kushner as he considers the reality of the Christ:

"The Christpower, the (breath) of God, clearly has moved throughout history and upon the face of the waters since the dawn of Creation—. Through Hebrew eyes God has become for me power that is deep within this world but always more than this world-- a holy *other* who is known only when God ignites and illumines an answering spirit that is deep within us all. My journey into the depths of my Christ thus becomes for me a journey beyond religion, beyond creeds, beyond language, even beyond rationality. It is a simultaneous journey into the meaning of life and into the heart of God."

These words of Bishop Spong are profound, and they bring to us a vision of the kind of spirituality needed in the twenty-first century— one in which, re-jecting their fundamentalist

extremes, the great religions of history can find a way together to lead us towards a unified and transformed humanity.

For with the evolution of the modern world and the shrinking of the Earth through technology, we can no longer afford the belief that historical Christianity is the only repository of divine truth, and that salvation means for Christians converting every human being to our particular form of tribalism.

Does this mean a rejection of our faith in Jesus and in the truth contained in the Christian Gospel? Quite the opposite! It means simply rejecting the heresy that has turned Jesus into an historic cause and rediscovering the universal nature of Christ in the light of our unfolding knowledge of the universe. Matthew Fox has written a book on this rediscovery entitled *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. In it, referring to the work of Thomas Aquinas, he says:

"The Cosmic Christ is not restricted to Jesus alone— every creature participates in some way in the likeness of the Divine Essence. The Trinity is at work— the Creator with the Cosmic Christ and the Spirit together— in a dynamic fashion in all of creation. An image of the Trinity pulsates in all conscious and loving creatures to the extent that they too— expand in love. Thus, wherever there is creativity, the Cosmic Christ is at work. Nor are individuals alone images of God, rather the whole Cosmos is. The son of God became human in order that humans might become gods and become the children of God."

For Matthew Fox, the historic Jesus becomes the vehicle through which the eternal, divine light enters the world and attracts all of creation to itself— as astrologers, the magi, from another culture were attracted by the star to the manger in Bethlehem.

Thus the Epiphany story is much more than a quaint tale about the origins of Jesus. It is a spontaneous proclamation of the truth that in Christ the light that informs all religions dwelt in a special way. In Him the river of light that flows beneath the creation rose yet again in a new and vital way to continue the transformation of the human race.

With this understanding we who are Christians can no longer feel that we have succeeded only when we have convinced those of other religions to accept our historic creeds. Rather, we need to come to the manger within ourselves containing the child of our own potential divinity and there kneel, offering our gifts of love and devotion. Our transformation into loving, self-giving beings given in the service of our God's people and of creation itself will be a force that leads others to Him.

So the Epiphany— the manifestation of Christ as the eternal light— becomes supremely real to us in our day and time. May we be grasped by its power that we may become lit from within by God's grace— ourselves epiphanies in a needy world.