

One of the early indications of the Christmas season is the appearance of lights, lights on all sorts of Christmas displays in streets, in shopping centres and shops, lights on Christmas trees. The Christmas lights displayed in the homes and gardens of many people in Melbourne - such as in The Boulevard in Ivanhoe - bring much delight to children and adults in our city. But the lights are not just decorative - they are also symbolic.

Christmas contains many spiritual truths, but it will be hard to grasp the others unless we grasp this one first. That truth is that the world is a dark place, and we will never find our way or see reality unless Jesus is our Light. The apostle John says this about Jesus in the Prologue to his gospel: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:9-10).

How is the world "dark"? In the Bible the word "darkness" refers to both evil and ignorance. It means first that the world is filled with evil and untold suffering. Look at what was happening at the time of the birth of Jesus - violence, injustice, abuse of power, homelessness, refugees fleeing opposition, families ripped apart. Sounds exactly like today, doesn't it?

The other way our world is "in the dark" is that no one knows enough to cure the evil and suffering in it. Isaiah 9:2, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light", is a famous Christian text, enshrined in Handel's "Messiah" as one of the prophecies of the birth of Jesus. It is the end of Isaiah 8, however, that explains why we need the light from God. In verses 19-20 we see people consulting mediums and magicians instead of God. Then the chapter ends, "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land..... They will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom..... (verses 21-22).

What is going on here? They are "looking toward the earth" and to human resources to fix the world. They are looking to their experts, to the mystics, to the scholars, for solutions. They admit they are in darkness, but they claim they can overcome it themselves. People make the same claim today. Some look more to the state, to government, some more to the market, and everyone these days looks to technology. But they share the identical assumption, namely that things are dark but we believe we can end that darkness with intellect and innovation.

There are those who believe that we have the light within us, and so we are the ones who can dispel the darkness of the world. We can overcome poverty, injustice, violence and evil. If we work together, we can create a "world of unity and peace". But can we? Actually it is the opposite! Humanity cannot save itself. In fact, the belief that we can save ourselves - that some political system or ideology can fix human problems - has only led to more darkness. For example, science unguided by moral principles gave us the Holocaust. It confirms what we see in Isaiah 8, that if we look only to the earth and human resources, the darkness only gets worse.

Christmas, therefore, is the most unsentimental, realistic way of looking at life. It does not say "Cheer up! If we all pull together we can make the world a better place". The Bible never counsels indifference to the forces of darkness, only resistance, but it supports no illusions that we can defeat them ourselves. The message of Christianity is, instead, "Things really are this bad, and we can't heal or save ourselves. Things really are this dark - nevertheless, there is hope". The Christmas message is that "on those living in the land of deep darkness (the shadow of death) a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). Notice that it doesn't say from the world a light has sprung, but upon the world a light has dawned. It has come from outside. There is light outside of this world, and Jesus has brought that light to save us. Indeed, he is the Light (John 8:12).

When Isaiah speaks of God's light "dawning" on a dark world, he is using the sun as a symbol. Sunlight brings life, truth and beauty. The sun gives us life. If the sun went out, we would freeze. The sun is the source of all life. So too the Bible says that only in God do we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We exist only because he is upholding us, keeping us together every moment. According to the Bible, we have lost the original, full, right relationship with God that our first parents, Adam and Eve had at the beginning (Genesis 3:1-24). That is the reason we will eventually know physical death, and it is why we experience spiritual death now - loss of meaning and hope, addictive, excessive desires, deep discontent, shame and struggles with identity, and an inability to change.

The sun shows us the truth. If you drive a car at night without your headlights on, you will probably crash. Why? Because light reveals the truth of things, how they really are. So too the Bible says that God is the source of all truth (1 John 1:5-6). At one level, the only reason you can know anything is because of God. God made your mind and your cognitive faculties. At another level, we can't possibly know who God is unless he reveals it to us, which he does in the Bible. And in truly understanding who he is, you come to understand who you are, his creation.

The sun is beautiful. Light is dazzling and gives joy. That is true literally. In places where there are only a few hours of daylight at certain times of the year, many suffer from depression. We need light for joy. God is the source of all beauty and joy. Augustine, the great church father, famously said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God". Augustine believed that even when you seem to be enjoying something else, God is the actual source of your joy. All joy is really found in God, and anything you do enjoy is derivative, because what you are really looking for is him, whether you know it or not.

God alone, then, has the life, truth, and joy that we lack and cannot generate ourselves. How can this divine light "dawn" upon us? Well, verses 6 and 7 of Isaiah 9 answer that question with stunning directness. The text tells us that the light has come "for to us a child is born". This child brings the light, because he is "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". It is remarkable that the four titles applied to this child belong to God alone. He is the Mighty God. He is the Everlasting Father, which means that he is the Creator, and yet he is born. There is nothing like this claim in any of the other major religions. He is a human being. However, at the same time he is God!

This is what we celebrate at Christmas. We stare dumbstruck, lost in wonder, love and praise. What are the implications of God being born into our world? Well, first of all, if Jesus Christ is really Mighty God and Everlasting Father, you can't just like him. In the Bible the people who actually saw and heard Jesus never reacted indifferently or even mildly. Once they realized what he was claiming about himself, either they were scared of him or furious with him or they knelt down before him and worshipped him. But nobody simply liked him. If the baby born at Christmas is the Mighty God, then he is the King of kings and Lord of lords and you just serve him completely. Second, if Jesus is Wonderful Counsellor and Prince of Peace, you should want to serve him. Why is he called a "Counsellor"? When you are going through something very difficult, it is good to talk to someone who has walked the same path, who knows personally what you have been going through. If God has really been born in a manger, then we have something that no other religion even claims to have - namely a God who truly understands you, from the inside of your experience. There's no other religion that says that God has suffered, that he knows what it is like to be abandoned by friends, to be crushed by injustice, to be tortured and die. A God who, when you talk to him, understands.

Isaiah calls him Wonderful Counsellor, which means that he is beautiful. And perhaps now we get a glimpse of why he is. He had the infinite greatness of being the Mighty God, yet he became one of us, immersed in our condition, in order to know our darkness. He saved us by going to the cross, and he did it all voluntarily, freely, out of sheer love. That is beautiful. When we find something to be beautiful, not just a duty, we dwell on it and

marvel at it. And so the reason we should obey him, not simply because we have to but also because we want to, is that, in light of all he is and has done for us, he is wonderful.

In short, Jesus is the divine Light of the world, because he brings a new life to replace our spiritual deadness, because he shows us the truth that heals our spiritual blindness, and because he is the beauty that breaks our addictions to things such as money, sex and power. As Wonderful Counsellor he walks with us even into and through the shadow of death (Matthew 4:16), where no other companion can go. He is a Light for us when all other lights go out.

How, though, can this light become ours? Notice it doesn't just say "For to us a child is born". It also says, "to us a son is given". It's a gift. It can be yours only if you are willing to receive it as a gift of grace. Verse 5 hints at this too. It speaks of a great battle, but it says, "Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire". This imagery means that the great victory over evil will not require our strength. We won't need a warrior's boot or armour or a sword. Burn them up. Someone else will do your fighting for you. Who? Isaiah doesn't tell us here. You have to wait until you get to the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah 42-55 where the prophet points to a mysterious deliverer who is to come. We are told that "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). When Jesus went to the cross, he paid the penalty for our sin. When we trust in Christ's work on our behalf, rather than in our own moral efforts, God forgives and accepts us and implants his Holy Spirit in us to renew us from the inside out. This great salvation, this light that dawns upon you with all its new life, truth and beauty, comes as a gift. The only way you can receive it is to admit that it is an undeserved grace.

Christmas is about receiving presents, but consider how challenging it is to receive certain kinds of gifts. Some gifts by their very nature make you swallow your pride. Imagine opening a present on Christmas morning from a friend - and it's a dieting book. Perhaps on an occasion in the past you had a friend who figured out you were in financial trouble and came to you and offered quite a lot of money to get you out of your predicament. If that has ever happened to you, you probably found that to receive the gift meant swallowing your pride. Some gifts are hard to receive because to do so is to admit you have flaws and weaknesses and you need help. There has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires us to do. Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, that nothing less than the death of the Son of God himself could save us. It means that you and I are not capable of pulling ourselves together and living moral and good lives.

To accept the Christmas gift you have to admit that you are a sinner. That you need to be saved by grace. That you need to give up control of your life. If we are honest that is descending lower than any of us really wants to go. Yet Jesus Christ's greatness is seen in how far down he came to love us. He descended into greatness, and the Bible says that it's only through repentance and faith that you come into his light.

When Jesus died on the cross, darkness fell over the land (Matthew 27:45). The Light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring us into God's beautiful, wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). The promises of Christmas cannot be discerned unless you first admit you can't save yourself, or even know yourself, without the light of his unmerited grace in your life.

Amen