



Teachings from Reverend Robert John

The Light Shines in the Darkness

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.
Thou hast multiplied the nation,
thou hast increased its joy;
they rejoice before thee
as with joy at the harvest,
as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
thou hast broken as on the day of Mid'ian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle
tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined.
Isaiah 9:2-7, 2*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of every human being. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the human will, but of God.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father
John 1:1-5, 9-14 amended.*

IT IS CHRISTMAS EVE and we gather that we may enter together into the twelve holy nights of the Christmas festival. The twelve holy nights in which the heavens are closest to us during the cycle of the spiritual year. The twelve holy nights in which we recognise, value and nurture the newness of Christ's life in us.

The midnight hour of this Christmas night approaches. The hour which, in ancient times, even before the birth of Christ, was a hallowed moment. This was the time when the Gods of ancient civilisations would appear and show themselves to those who were worthy and well prepared. This was also the hour in which the darkness of midnight could be changed into the radiance of the midday sun.

We have those memories stored within our subconscious, and they stir within us as we gather to celebrate the midnight mass each Christmas; as we gather to celebrate the birth of light in the midst of darkness.

Light Shines in the Darkness

A light to shine in the darkness of the world, in the dark moments of our lives and in the dark places of our being and to bring enlightenment, release and transformation has been a hope and longing within human souls throughout the ages.

The Christmas festival is a celebration of light shining in the darkness.

In Luke's Gospel a radiant light fills the heavens as the angelic host appear to the shepherds:

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were filled with fear [the Greek phobos (fear) also means reverence or respect] ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"
Luke 2:9, 13-14

In Matthew's Gospel a radiant star guides the magi in their journey to the new-born Christ child:

And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.
Matthew 2:9b-11a

These gospels tell us the "how" of the Christmas story. In John's Gospel – the mystical gospel – we read the other important aspect, the "why" of the story of Christmas:

In him was life, and the life was the light of every human being. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world ... To all who received him ... he gave power to become children of God.
John 1:4-5, 9, 12

The Word became flesh. God's expression became manifest in the midst of humanity, establishing an inextinguishable light to guide human evolution; a radiant, unconquerable light to guide us in our journey to spiritual maturity.

Walking in the Light

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in the land of deep darkness – on them light has shone. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This, fraters and sorores, is the night when we celebrate the coming of the light. Here, in the dark of the night, we feast and sing of the light which breaks open the darkness and illuminates the whole world.

We sing and celebrate with yearning hope, for we live in dark and troubled times. Nation invades nation, leaving terror and destruction in their wake. Angry mobs attack each other and give birth to still more bitterness and fear. Ordinary people run themselves ragged trying ensure that it is not them and their families who fall through the cracks into redundancy, poverty or despair. And anyone who shines a challenging light onto the dark violence of it all risks being denounced and rejected ...

But the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in the land of deep darkness – on them light has shone.

Tonight we feast in honour of a tender, new-born baby. We join our voices with the unlikely company of angels and archangels, and sheep herders and eastern mystics, and declare this Christ child to be the light of the world, the true light that enlightens everyone, the light that the darkness cannot overcome. What an extraordinary claim! What an unlikely, incredible cause for celebration!

He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Of course, the darkness does not capitulate to the coming of the light without a struggle. For it is of the nature of darkness to deal in death; to threaten and strike, to victimise and destroy. If light is born in the midst of the darkness, there is an attempt to snuff it out. Herod dispatches the death squads, unleashing terror. "Kill the child. Kill as many children as it takes to be sure!"

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. The story we celebrate this night is not a safe one. From the very beginning there were few who could accept it. Every version of the story attests to this. John says he came to his own but his own people did not accept him. Luke says that even as he was being born, no room could be found for him and the doors were shut to him. Matthew says the very mention of him threw the king into a murderous fit of rage, and the child and his family had to flee. Right here in the stories of his birth, we already hear echoes of the stories of his transforming, redeeming death. Even as a newborn we could not find room for him. Even at the first glimmer of the light of the world, the world was saying "There's no room for you here", "You're not one of us".

This light is unbearable, because if we condone it, if we look into this light and acknowledge what we see – that it is possible for love to banish fear, and grace to banish vengefulness, and humility to banish arrogance – then all our petty excuses will fall away and our vanity, hostility and resentfulness will lie exposed in his light. If we look into this light and acknowledge that it is possible to command awesome power and yet to choose to become as fragile and vulnerable and powerless as a newborn baby in our dealings with others, then all our posturing will fall away and our defensiveness and greed and aggression will lie exposed in his light.

But we have sat in darkness for so long that every fibre of our being hungers for this light. It both terrifies us and fills us with longing for the light of grace and truth, the light which promises personal transformation and the salvation of the world. If we can steel ourselves to look into this light and behold it, allowing it to permeate and transform us,

then we will find ourselves born anew, born of God, as children of God, full of grace and truth. And if we begin to do that and begin to approach the world with the same humility, mercy and resilient love shown by Christ, then the light will grow brighter and the darkness will retreat a little further.

Receiving the Light

For us to be born as children of God, though, we must accept Christ's light and receive it into our consciousness and being.

*To all who **received** him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the human will, but of God.*

John 1:12-13

The transformation and renewal afforded us through Christ's radiant light does not come to us as an automatic right because of our family background or nationality; that is, it is "not by blood". It is not automatically a part of us by virtue of our human nature; that is, "nor by the will of the flesh". It does not become part of us because of someone else's decision; that is "nor by the will of man". We must "receive it". We must decide and act to allow this unconquerable light to penetrate the darkness of our life and being.

The "beginning" that John speaks of in his hymn of Christ's incarnation – of the Word becoming flesh and bringing light into our darkness – reminds us of God's creative action at the beginning of time. In Genesis, God speaks into the dark void and creation occurs. That which God speaks becomes manifest. Humanity is created in God's likeness. In the Prologue to John's Gospel, God's Word again becomes manifest so that humanity may be *re-created* in Christ's image: Christ in you, the hope of glory!

The Christmas "Process"

This is the mystery of Christmas night when we gather to behold Christ's unconquerable light shining in the darkness. But is only the beginning of the Christmas "process"; the first of the twelve holy nights. A child is born; a vessel into which the Christ spirit can pour itself and become manifest and expressed. A seed is planted.

During these twelve holy nights of the Christmas festival we are called to be open, receptive, responsive to the outpouring of the heavens. To recognise, receive, nurture and protect that which is entrusted to us. For during these twelve holy nights of Christmas we can behold, like Simeon did, the glory of Christ's light:

"Mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."
Luke 2:30-32

The twelve holy nights of Christmas culminate in Epiphany, the showing forth of Christ's glory. This spiritual feast concluding Christmas celebrates Christ's baptism in the Jordan River. The vessel is filled with spirit. Now the Word has indeed become flesh and can dwell among us!

Tonight we celebrate the light which shines in the darkness and cannot be conquered. We celebrate the new life this establishes within us. May we each journey through these twelve holy nights of Christmas in such a way that the life-giving presence of Christ's light may become more fully manifest in us. May the mystery of Christmas fill our beings.

*O radiant sun! your glorious light
Shines brightly at this midnight hour;
Filling the heav'ns with joy and love,
And to the earth, redeeming pow'r.*

*Incarnate Word who was with God
Since time began and evermore,
All things in you were brought to birth;
Only in you, true life is found.*

*O radiant Son! in you is life,
Your radiant life, lights ev'ryone.
You shine your light into the dark
And darkness does not overcome.*

*O radiant Son! True light of God
Enlight'ning each and ev'ry soul,
You come into our world and shine;
May we, O Christ, your light behold.*

*Word become flesh, dwell in us now;
That we now know your grace and truth.
Your glory shines from age to age;
Shine in us now, O living Son!*

So shall it be.

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Swan Hill.*



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