

"Arise and Shine" – Isaiah 60:1-6

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our text for meditation for this Sunday is from the First Reading of today: Isaiah 60:1-6. Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Triune God; Father, + Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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When Isaiah wrote this text, conditions in the world and amongst God's chosen people were sad and depressing. A wicked king named Ahaz was on the throne of Judah. And Isaiah lamented about the hopelessness of the situation at that moment of time. Conditions in the world were no better. Darkness covered the earth, and thick darkness the people. Outside of Israel, all the inhabitants of the earth, with very few exceptions, were blind heathens, they were committing the worst sins and vices. But Isaiah's lament was not only for his time and age. He looked forward to the time when the Christ was to appear. That, too, was to be an age without light, in which darkness and night covered the people. His vision was true.

When Christ came, there was devout Zacharias and his pious wife Elizabeth, the blessed Virgin, God fearing Joseph, godly Simeon, and the prophetess Anna. A few shepherds accepted the newborn Christ Child in faith. A few Magi came seeking the King of the Jews. But apart from them no one was concerned about the Saviour, who had come. In Bethlehem no one cared. Judea and Galilee saw nothing of the Light that had risen. All around was a blind world, kept by Satan in sin's darkness. So the prophet Isaiah's words applied: "Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples." And as true as these words were for way back then, they are also true for today. The Light has shined for 2000 years, and the Gospel has gone out all over the world. Yet there are still hundreds of millions of unbelievers. Lands that are called Christian are inhabited by countless unbaptized heathen, bold mockers and haters of God and His Christ.

Even in the Church things are no better. Christendom is divided into countless denominations and sects. An army of false teachers proclaims untruths under the name of truth. Error and falsehood have darkened the light. People have rejected the truth but are searching for any other way out of misery and death. If Isaiah lived today, he undoubtedly would say: "Darkness covers the earth, and thick darkness the peoples." And yet with divine zeal and in unyielding power he would also call to us: Arise, Shine, for Your Light Has Come!

What light has come? What is he talking about? When Isaiah says "light", what does he mean? Surely, he is not talking about the invention of electricity and light bulbs. We know that the light did not shine during his time for the whole text is a vision of the future. St. John explains this prophecy when he writes of Jesus Christ: "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it .... The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world." Jesus says: "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." Aged Simeon understood this prophecy when he took the Christ Child in his arms and exclaimed: "Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory to Thy people Israel."

So it is Christ whom the Prophet points to when he cries out: "Your Light has come!" And Christ also comes to people in His Word, and since the world is to be illuminated by the preaching of the Gospel, the Prophet also means the preaching of Christ and of the salvation He brought. Through the preaching of Christ people are to be brought to a knowledge of salvation. They are to be called, gathered, and enlightened by the Gospel. People were to become children of light. God was to call them out of darkness into His marvellous light.

The Prophet points forward to the time of the New Testament, when the salvation that had appeared in Christ Jesus was to be preached in every language and the light of the Gospel was to shine from the Holy Christian Church into the darkness of false religion. There was to be a people who walked in this light. Christ Himself said of those who believe in Him: "You are the light of the world." And so we wonder also, what the Prophet means when he says, "Arise, shine"? No doubt he thought of his own people. Israel was to accept the Saviour when He appeared in the flesh. Israel was to be alert and watchful lest it permit the time of gracious visitation to slip by in sleepy indifference. Israel was to take hold of the offered salvation in repentance and faith.

The Prophet also calls to his people that, having accepted this salvation, they should not hide their light under a bushel, but raise it up high and place it on a stand that it might give light and shine in the world. Israel was to be a city set on a hill, visible to all, and so attract many nations by its shining light. The Apostolic Church heeded this call of the prophet. From Israel, from Jerusalem, the light of salvation came. The Apostles filled the earth with the preaching of the Gospel. By their blessed efforts the light shone also into many wild lands and finally our own place and upon us.

That we today are not walking in darkness but have the light of life is due to the fact that the early Church faithfully followed the calling of Isaiah and that our ancestors in the faith in turn kept that light shining and going forth.

This call of the Prophet is also directed to us. It is as if he were saying to people sitting and walking in darkness today: You poor, unconverted folk, get into the light. You pitiful people still walking in natural darkness and in the shadow of death, wake up, be concerned about your miserable condition. Stay away from the Light no longer. Stop closing your heart against its beams. The Light is come. It shines also for you. Yet you do not see it because you are blind by nature. You sleep in broad daylight. Awake, arise, you who sleep, and Christ shall give you light. Also to the believer the Prophet calls: Arise, shine! In you, too, there still is darkness, unbelief, doubt, timidity, fear, and sin. Allow the Saviour, the heavenly Light, to lighten your heart again and again through the Gospel, so that the reflection of the Light will be seen in godliness and in love for one another. Be a light where you are, in your home, in your church, for others.

The Prophet calls to the entire Church: Arise. Shine, become a light, you people of the Lord. Behold, the day is far spent, and it is toward evening. The night is coming. Still the harvest is great, and much remains to be done. Yet the labourers are few. Whosoever can, let him pray, pray the Lord of the harvest that He send labourers into the harvest. Yes, go to work yourself. Work tiredly while it is day, that the light may reach all who are in darkness and that the earth may be filled with the knowledge and glory of God.

Friends, as the Christmas season finally comes to a close and we go back into our routine everyday lives and relationships, there are many disturbing and saddening things. Walking in the light, we see many still walk in darkness. The Light has come, but they continue in night. Perhaps there is husband or wife, son or daughter, father or mother, friend, relative, or associate walking blindly in the way of unbelief toward certain destruction. We have talked and pleaded, wept and prayed, but all seems to be in vain. We are haunted by the terrible thought of how it must end, and that thought fills us with horror.

Into this darkness comes the call: "Arise, shine!" The light of faith and hope must not fail. You must not despair and give up. Yours, too, is the promise: "Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." The hour of triumph shall come also for you. All your wrestling with God for this or that soul shall not have been in vain. With this promise ringing in our ears, we leave this holy place with new hope and strength and with the firm resolution to continue our prayers and efforts for the lost souls.

The text reminds us, however, that our interest and concern is not to be restricted to the circle of our immediate relatives and acquaintances. It speaks of nations and kings, of sons and daughters from afar, of the abundance of the sea, the wealth of the Gentiles, of Midian and Ephah and Sheba, Ukraine, Nicaragua. All these shall come to our Light. Christ is the Light, not of a few but of the world. Our Light must shine into far countries.

We need to be reminded of our world mission, for we are inclined to forget and to neglect the work of the Lord beyond our horizon. There is so much to be done at home, so much to engage our attention and efforts. It seems that we can do little in the face of hundreds of millions and whole continents in darkness. What is our little candle and feeble light in this vast night? And even more discouraging, there are supposedly Christian countries making every effort to kill and destroy, steeping themselves in the worst of sins. After shining for 2000 years, it would seem that the Light has not penetrated the darkness of this world. And yet, the picture of the text is to encourage us, so that we may not weary of sending our light into the world. True, we are not going to catch all the souls we would like. But it is also true that we will catch every soul which God, according to His wise and good will, intends for us as fruit of our efforts.

The Lord moves us forward; cheerfully and confidently! Proclaim the Lord's death until He comes! Then we shall see that our labours have not been in vain. Only then shall we know who was brought to the Light because God used us as His instruments, when those we won enter with us into the eternal light. Therefore arise and shine; for your Light has come, and the Glory of the Lord has risen upon you! Amen

“The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour”. Amen