

Epiphany III Year A 2019

As a teenager, I vividly remember the day a good friend shared a book with me. It was called *The Lost Treasures of Europe*. You will understand that this person knew of my love of architecture, and the book consisted of pictures of the great buildings of Europe destroyed during the Second World War. Page after page of sepia photographs of buildings representing the whole stretch of European history and culture; from Russian monasteries and palaces of the Tsars, the wonders of Italian and German palazzos and medieval churches to Coventry Cathedral and half-timbered buildings in London which had survived the Great Fire in 1666. All destroyed in the maelstrom of five or six short years.

What I wasn't prepared for were the final pictures. *The Lost Treasures of Europe* ended with photographs of the victims of the Holocaust; those terrible scenes of death pits filled with thousands upon thousands of the emaciated bodies of a people classed as *untermenschen* by the Nazis - subhuman - the children, women and men of European Jewry, million upon million. People just like you and me. Alongside them in the terror of human extermination were the Roma and Slavs, the physically and mentally disabled, gays, peoples of difference, together with any who stood up to a regime who managed to disable the empathy and sense of humanity of many within their own nation and many others in nations they controlled. Although we know that more were killed by Stalin's mad purges, and the wretched policies of Mao Tse-tung's fearsome regime in China, never had the systematic and mechanised extermination of a whole people been undertaken because of faith. Tomorrow marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and I think that this gives us a real opportunity to consider both the call of our Faith, together with an understanding of the way in which we approach the world.

The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament reading talks of the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali as lands of contempt. This is his take on the historical situation on the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians. Isaiah is saying, 'Well look. They turned away from following God faithfully, and it all went wrong for them.' By his time, the people of the North were following all sorts of deities, and there was a sense that the rot of turning from God had set in in these areas. However, in vivid language, Isaiah speaks of light shining even in this situation. Nothing is beyond the power of God. *'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,'* and *'those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.'*

Have you ever noticed that this phrase is in the past tense? There has been speculation that perhaps Isaiah refers to someone who has already come. Yet it seems more likely to me to be an example of the 'prophetic past,' something which will come and therefore is as good as done.

Matthew uses part of this prophecy in our Gospel reading today, seeing it clearly pointing to Jesus, and it is one of many scholarly uses of Isaiah's texts throughout his account of the Lord's journey. We have heard an important passage because it deals firstly with Jesus as he takes a risk in leaving home to start his ministry, moving to the Galilee of the Gentiles to proclaim repentance as the Kingdom of God draws near. Ultimately this Kingdom will not be limited to his own people, although Jesus himself still has a journey to travel in the

fulness of this understanding. We also heard the call of the first disciples, and it is striking that these fishermen too leave the comfort zone of home. For them, this is the beginning of the rollercoaster life which they will experience as they journey with Jesus. These uneducated fisherfolk receive this call to leave what was probably their ancestral occupation and take a leap into the unknown – and they end up in spiritual deep water! This journey with the Lord leads them to new life in him, and they each in their own way discover a voice to proclaim the Gospel message to all they meet. Their proclamation leads directly to you and me here today. What an amazing legacy! Although they have their struggles along the way, the growing sense of God's Love at work within their lives enables them ultimately to reveal the Light of Christ to those they encounter.

This is our own call. Sometimes it seems a daunting or even an impossible task to draw others to know the radical grace of faith open to all. We are to know God within our own journey – the abiding presence - no matter what. Sometimes we struggle, and sometimes start to sink beneath the waves of life. But God never abandons us. It is our propensity to allow the divine presence of the Holy Spirit to work within which makes the difference. From this we bring light to others.

I think that it is important to remember the way in which the Lord begins to gather a team to accompany him on his journey. We too are part of the team - the Church. On our own, we can't begin to bring about the completion of the Kingdom Jesus calls us to, but we can certainly make waves. Through Baptism we become the beloved disciples of the Lord, each one of us called in our own way to help change the world as part of the team. We may sometimes feel disconsolate at the state of the Church - but look at Paul's passage today. He is pointing to similar tensions two thousand years ago (!) yet concludes that living through the power of selfless love Jesus revealed on the cross does ultimately draw people to know the richness of life lived in faith. The Church is not some faceless blob. You are the Church - I am the Church!

Amidst the darkness of the Holocaust, there were people revealing the light of Jesus Christ. We have the accounts of those called the '*Righteous among the Nations*,' who displayed selfless love in saving Jewish people at the risk of certain death if they were found out. There were many others whose names we will not know who tried to do what they could, and their example shines brightly in God's grace as well.

Christian theology was profoundly changed in the light of the terrors of the Holocaust. There was an acknowledgement that no matter what a person believed (or didn't believe) - all were Children of God. The shameful blot of anti-Semitism which had cast a wicked shadow over Christianity for many centuries, was recognised for the darkness it is. We are called to fight it on behalf of our brothers and sisters within Judaism with every fibre of our being. In this we remember that our Blessed Saviour was Jewish - born and bred - and lived his own life from beginning to end as a faithful son of Torah.

Our own call and unity as members of the Church is found in the power of the cross of Jesus Christ – a light forever shining in the darkness - a light which sustains us and gives meaning to our lives. In such knowledge, we are to touch the world through Christ, the **true** light, who lightens every human heart.



The White Crucifixion - Marc Chagall (1887–1985) The Art Institute, Chicago

Isaiah 9: 1-4

9 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;

they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

I Corinthians 1: 10-18

10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.^[b] 12 What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God^[c] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. 18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4: 12-23

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:
15 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'
17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'
18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.
23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.