



Teachings from Reverend Robert John On Us Great Light Shines!

*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.*

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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

ISAIAH, IN PRE-FIGURING CHRIST'S INCARNATION through the Christmas mysteries, uses two key images which have accompanied us throughout the season of Advent, as we have prepared ourselves to enter more fully into the experience of Christmas.

One of these images from Isaiah is the great light shining on a people who walk in darkness, and we have reminded ourselves of this light throughout Advent as we have lit our advent candles at home, and here beside our altar. The light has increased in intensity each week, and now we gather as the midnight hour of Christmas approaches and bask in candlelight, in the light that shines into us from the heavens and in the light that is kindled within us by Christ.

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(Isaiah 9:2)

The other image based on Isaiah is that of the rose, which we are perhaps most familiar with from the carol: *Lo, how a rose e're blooming.*

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [Isaiah says], and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and awe of the Lord. ... In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.

(Isaiah 11:1-2, 9)

This unfolding rose, shooting forth from the Jesse's root, is representative of both the Christ-child and of Mary, his mother. It images for us both the

flowering of Christ's presence in this world and in our hearts, and the nurturing care of Mary who enabled his incarnation into this world and protected him as he grew to maturity. We have watched this rose blossoming –

revealing itself on our altar frontal – from a bud on Advent Sunday to a full-blown rose filled with light on this Christmas night.

The midnight hour of Christmas now approaches. The hour which, in ancient times, even before the birth of Christ, was a hallowed moment. 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 these images and 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, and this is proclaimed to us in the prologue of John's mystical gospel:

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

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 resentment 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.

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

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 night, we feast and sing of the light which breaks open the darkness and illuminates the whole world.

Tonight we feast in honour of a tender, newborn baby. We join our voices with the unlikely company of angels and archangels, 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 and 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 resentment 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 human will”. 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!

Keeping These Things in Our Hearts

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 days and 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 indeed behold the glory of Christ's light.

Like Joseph and Mary we must protect and nurture the emerging light and life of Christ within us. Remember the words with which we began this Advent:

Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

(Luke 2:19)

That is our spiritual calling now, in these twelve days and holy nights of the spiritual feast of Christmas. We must make ourselves like Mary and quietly ponder the mysteries of Christmas at the very heart of our being. We must make ourselves like the rose on our altar frontal, enfolding the golden light within the very centre of our being, and opening ourselves to reveal its radiance shining out from within us.

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

*A rose is blooming in the dark of night,
And from its petals shines a holy light;
The fragrance of the rose is subtle and sweet,
And all around a silence still and deep.*

*As we behold it, darkness melts away;
Behold the rose shine bright as day.
The holy child is brought to birth;
Now radiance streams through all the earth.*

I wish you a happy and holy Christmas ... one in which we can join in celebration with both the heavens and the earth to proclaim Christ's glory!

So shall it be.

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