

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Epiphany (January 6)

Lessons: 1

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah [**EE-fah**], all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew [**SHOW**] forth the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar [**KEY-durr**] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth [**nih-BUY-awth**] shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish [**TARR-shish**] first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the Lord thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.³

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 60:1-9 (KJV).

³ II Corinthians 4:1-6 (KJV).

⁴ Isaiah 60:2b-3 (KJV).

⁵ Isaiah 60:2b-3 (RSV).

⁶ MASSEY HAMILTON SHEPHERD, JR., THE OXFORD AMERICAN PRAYER BOOK COMMENTARY 108 (Oxford University Press 1950).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Derek Kidner, Isaiah*, in HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 621 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹¹ Isaiah 60:2b (RSV).

¹² *A Catechism*, The Book of Common Prayer 581 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

¹³ Exodus 24:16-17.

¹⁴ II Chronicles 5:14, 7:1-3.

¹⁵ Acts 9:3, 8-9.

¹⁶ Exodus 34:29-35.

¹⁷ The Most Rev'd Michael Dean Stephens, late Bishop Ordinary of New Orleans and Metropolitan of the Original Province of The Anglican Catholic Church.

¹⁸ Isaiah 60:3 (RSV).

¹⁹ Isaiah 60:6 (RSV).

²⁰ Psalm 72:1-11.

²¹ Isaiah 60:6 & 9 (RSV).

²² *Leslie S. M'Caw & J. A. Motyer, Psalms*, in MAY & METZGER, *op. cit.* 496.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Psalm 72:10-11 (RSV).

²⁵ Psalm 72:11 (RSV).

²⁶ Isaiah 60:3 (RSV).

²⁷ Isaiah 60:9b (RSV).

²⁸ Archbishop Stephens' beautiful composition customarily concludes Eucharists at Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA, where he once served both as Rector and as Bishop Ordinary.

²⁹ Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS; Honorary Canon, The Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

“Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[T]he Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction:

The text for this sermon, as just read to you, is in the glorious, rolling English of the Authorized Version, otherwise known as the King James Version. Its wonderful sound is a large part of the reason I gave it to you in that form. However, as is so often the case, its sense is, perhaps, a bit better grasped when we hear it in a slightly more modern translation, in this case, in the Revised Standard Version: “[T]he LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”⁵

His mission will not be just to that one miniscule country, however; instead, as both the Psalm says, “all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him”,²⁵ which Isaiah repeats, “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising”.²⁶

Conclusion:

But what we must never permit ourselves to overlook is the reason all this coming to Christ, that these Scriptures foretell, will happen in the fullness of God’s time. And that is the scary part, at least the part that should scare those of us who make up Christ’s Church, for all this is appointed to happen through us, as the prophet adds to his previous comment: “because he has glorified you.”²⁷

For if God’s plan is that we are to be the agents of the Messiah’s achieving supremacy in this world—and that is His plan—then are we prepared to take on and accomplish that task? Are we actively working to develop ourselves (always with the help of His grace) into the sort of people who can accomplish it, the sort of people on whom God’s glory will be seen?

To assist us toward this end, let me send you forth with the beautiful prayer of dismissal from which I earlier quoted you one phrase. Let us pray,

“Go with us, O heavenly Father, into the world. Mold us, make us, and shape us into the image of Christ, that men may take notice that we have been with Jesus, and so join with us in Thy house to glorify His holy Name, who died and rose again for us, Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”²⁸

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, JD²⁹
January 6, 2013

But, as we are reminded every Epiphany, that visit was itself the precursor or foreshadowing of another movement, the coming of the peoples of the world to Christ and His Church. And that second branch of this prophecy was clearly beginning to be fulfilled during the lifetimes of Jesus' first followers and companions, as the new Church spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire, and, at least as to the world as known to the residents of the Mediterranean basin in Classical times, was largely complete within three hundred years after Christ's death. For by 381 AD, the Roman Empire was a Christian Empire and the influence of its new state religion had already spread beyond its boundaries.

C. Finally, Isaiah's prophecy affirms that the Child to whom the Magi would be sent was the Savior whom God had promised to Israel.

Isaiah told his hearers, "A multitude of camels shall cover you, ... all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. ... [T]he ships of Tarshish ... bring your sons from far, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you."²¹

This mention of Sheba (in southern Arabia),²² whence the finest incense came, and to Tarshish (in southern Spain),²³ whence gold came, is a direct reference to the righteous King—the One, it is implied, Who is to come, that is, to the Savior and Messiah—as depicted in Psalm 72:

"May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!
"May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!"²⁴

So here we have the image of the great King, the righteous lawgiver and judge Who will redeem and reform Israel.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the overall theme for each Sunday and Holy Day on the Church's *kalendar* is set by the Collect for the Day. As we have it in the Book of Common Prayer, that Collect gives today's theme in this way:

"O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, who know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." (Here, by the way, "fruition" in a rather uncommon usage does not mean "completeness" but instead means "enjoyment".⁶)

Theme:

This recension of this particular Collect is one of the very few cases in which Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's pen slipped so that, at least according to one commentator, the version he left to us is not an improvement over the original but, most unfortunately, actually weakens the sense of that original:

"O GOD, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles; Mercifully grant that we, who know thee now by faith, may be brought to the contemplation of thy Majesty by sight; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."⁷

Development:

The same commentator cited above points out that the message of the original version of this Collect is that the wise men were led to the Christ Child by seeing with their physical eyes the star God had placed in the heavens, while we are led to Christ, and therefore ultimately to the vision of God in heaven, by the inner eyes of faith.⁸ Thus, too, the point of Archbishop Cranmer's alteration, with its emphasis on our enjoyment of God in the hereafter, is that our vision of God in His majesty

will be far more glorious than was the Magi's sight of Him in His lowliness.⁹

These themes in the Collect are particularly interesting when they are contrasted with those in the opening sentences of today's First Lesson. For here Isaiah was addressing simultaneously the short run and the long run, that is, what would be, over the next few centuries after he wrote, the actual history of the earthly Israel, and at the same time what will be, over the whole course of human history, the ultimate destination of the faithful. Or, as another commentator has put it, Isaiah used the language of the Old Testament ordinances and of the literal, earthly city of Jerusalem to depict blessings that will finally transcend that earthly order to be realized in "the Jerusalem above".¹⁰

A. Isaiah prophesied that the Israelites would meet God and, through that meeting, would be transformed.

Isaiah's prediction was that "the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you."¹¹ Here, "glory" is not just a poetic turn of phrase but describes the physical manifestation of an overwhelming spiritual breakthrough into this created world, something that is quite similar to the concept of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us".¹² The "glory" of which Isaiah speaks is, in Hebrew, the *shekinah* [**shih-KINE-eh**].

This *shekinah* [**shih-KINE-eh**] is the intense light, so strong that a person cannot look directly at it, which is the sign of the presence of God. This is the light that Moses encountered on Mount Sinai.¹³ This is the light that filled Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem when it was inaugurated and the Lord took up residence within it.¹⁴ And this is the light that blinded the persecuting Pharisee Saul of Tarsus as he made his way toward Damascus to harry the church there.¹⁵ In the Bible, the appearance of this *shekinah* [**shih-KINE-eh**] or "glory" is always a sign of divine activity.

Thus when Isaiah told his hearers that "his glory will be seen upon you", they recognized that he was telling them they would have an encounter with the presence of God and that encounter would change their appearance, just as Moses's face, after he met God on the mountain, shone with God's unique light, in the same way a moon reflects the overwhelming light of its sun.¹⁶

So, in sum, what Isaiah told his hearers was that they would encounter God and would be so transformed by that encounter that others would be able to see on them outward evidence of that "close call" with the divine. How blessed would any of our congregations be, if strangers could see upon us unmistakable signs that "we have been with Jesus, and so join with us in His house to glorify His name!"¹⁷

B. Isaiah's prophecy foretells both the coming of the Magi to the Christ Child and, after Our Lord's death, Resurrection, and Ascension, the coming of the peoples of the world into His Church.

Isaiah's prediction of the visible transformation of the Jews is followed by his statement that "[N]ations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."¹⁸ From our vantage point, and with the gift of some twenty-seven hundred years of hindsight after Isaiah wrote and two thousand years of it after the events that accompanied Our Lord's birth and early childhood, this particular prophecy is clearly another double-pronged one.

Its first and most obvious reference is to the visit of the Magi, as reported in the second chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. This is underscored by another of Isaiah's phrases, "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD",¹⁹ for "gold and frankincense" clearly refer to two of the three "gifts of the Magi", the two that acknowledge Christ as the great King who was to come to save Israel.²⁰