

First Sunday after Christmas  
The Child of Peace

30 December 2012  
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*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. (Isaiah.)*

I went to see the movie "The Hobbit" with my family last week. I read "The Hobbit", and then all of the "Lord of the Rings" books to each of my children as they got to the right age, when they were still small. Excitedly we watched as the movies came out.

The stories of Tolkein have a *mythic* quality to them. They are made-up stories, fictions. But they are also true stories, dealing with the power of darkness and the almost astonishing ability of light to remain. They deal with evil and with good, and cleverly, with the places in us where the two forces meet and entangle us. No one, not even the elves, come out with utterly clean hands. And even the wicked creature Gollum has threads of goodness in his evil soul.

Tolkein's stories have lasted because we recognize the truth in them. Not literal truth, but deep spiritual and human truth.

When Isaiah wrote of the people who lived in darkness it makes me think of the darkness that spreads out from an evil Lord. The darkness of Moriah, the darkness that threatened to engulf Europe under Hitler, the darkness that cloaks the childhood homes ruled by violent and/or alcoholic parents. There are darkneses of mental illness, of bullies in school, of poverty and disempowerment. There is a darkness to illness and dying too.

Isaiah says, *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.*

How does darkness change towards light?  
What has been your experience?

In North American culture we have our own mythic stories. They are of the Warrior Hero. Imagine Waterworld, Terminator, James Bond, any Western. Our story is of the One Hero who comes with tremendous strength to overcome the power of darkness. With his true grit, his cunning, his weaponry and his indomitable will he brings light to his largely helpless people.

In many ways this was the Saviour the people of Israel looked for. A rescuer. A strong adult figure to save their infantilized, oppressed selves. They could not do it. They needed someone to come and do it for them. It is in a blaze of overpowering fire and light that darkness is banished.

For Isaiah the one who comes is not the muscled, smug, self-assured, 6'4" tall man of action. *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us. Or as Luke tells it, And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

This is no blaze of glory. It is no triumphant entry. Who even noticed? *Shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

We still have people amongst us who lived through the battle against darkness in Europe in the 40's. We would do well to ask them to tell us how the darkness was overcome. Who was the solo-Hero? Who single-handedly killed the villain Hitler in the cataclysmic finale? Who was it that the crowds cheered?

There was no super-hero, but rather many minor ones. And not all the enemy were in the dark of sin, nor all the allies in the light of righteousness. And even the heroes went through the battles with fear in their hearts, and longed for home and safety more than glory and victory. I think they were sustained by hope and found courage.

If courage and hope are what helped real people in battle, then they are small things, passed from one to another. They are like candle flames that one person can kindle flame for a friend with. They can be blown out, and can be rekindled.

*And they found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. A child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

In the Mythic story of the coming of the Christ into our darkened world it is not like our North American mythology. The picture could hardly be more different. It is a helpless infant, the child of peasants, noticed by shepherds. And as they gathered around him they were not filled with war-lust, nor knocked over by power. They were brought to their knees by the wonder and the amazement and the love which radiates, like candle-light, from a baby.

Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the early Christians were not helpless, infantilised sheep bleating for rescue. God depended upon them to take up the love and the mercy, the truth and the hope. They had to be the responsible adults in the story. Just like all the countless responsible adult men and women who turned the tide in WW2.

As Christianity grew and became powerful inside the Emperor model of Roman Authority we find that the Christmas story gets overwhelmed by words like "God of Power and Might", and "Immortal Invisible, God only wise." Ordinary Christians became "sinners humbly seeking deliverance from the death they cannot escape." But this is not the truth Christmas reveals. This is the mythology of Hollywood.

Our truth is like the Hobbit's story. Mr Baggins is a coward, he is a glutton and he is soft. And he does his best, and takes on things too big for him because there is no one else to do them. And by luck and by unexpected help, and by the skin of his teeth he makes it through and saves others along the way. He becomes a hero by accident.

Our truth is that the light of Christ is a flickering candle flame. We light ours from his, and we, in turn light others. So the darkness is driven back by a million small flames. And even when ours is blown out we can turn to another and rekindle. No one is coming with a FLASH that will obliterate darkness. We have each to grow up and be adults in the kingdom, co-heirs with Christ, part of his body, up holders of his quiet, humble ministry.

*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 and you and I are the bearers of it now.*

So as we go out in the peace of Christ ..... to do what? To love and to serve the Lord. To get on with it as trusted stewards of the faith, bearers of light, taking responsibility, not looking for someone greater to do it for us.

May the peace as well as the challenge of Christmas stay with you always.