

“Last Day Epiphany”

“Arise, shine, for your light has come ...” These words of the prophet Isaiah are very appropriate for the celebration of The Epiphany of Our Lord – for light reveals that which is hidden, or in the dark – and epiphany literally means “to make manifest.” The Season of Epiphany is all about manifesting, or revealing, the Savior born for us.

We hear these words of Isaiah and usually apply them to the Visit of the Magi – which is understandable, since it is the Old Testament lesson appointed for this day in the Church Year.

We hear, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” – and a star arises in the east and shines upon the magi. The star leads them to the place where the Christ Child was to be found. Like “the glory of the Lord” in the OT (in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – in the Temple over the mercy seat), the glory of the Lord reveals that the Lord Himself is present – and so it is, for the magi.

“For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people.” Indeed, it was a dark world into which Isaiah preaches these words. God’s own people had despised God’s justice and were anything but righteous. Despicable leadership and gross idolatry plagued the people. Darkness, depravity, and death abounded.

So also in the days of the Christ Child. One only has to look at King Herod as an example – a self-serving king who would kill little children – all for himself, his position and his power. Even the magi were surrounded with paganism in the east. God’s people lived in a darkened world.

Into this darkness shines the glory of the Lord – “and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” The magi are representative of the nations that come to the brightness of the Lord’s rising – and the mention of kings is probably the basis for that familiar hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.”

“Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult,” writes Isaiah. The magi see the radiant star – they come and bow down and worship their newborn King – and “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

“The abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you.” And so the magi come – apparently with camels – and bringing wealth, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

An Epiphany indeed! A manifestation – mankind’s gloom transformed into the radiance of salvation. What was true for Israel in Isaiah’s day when the glory of the Lord shines into their captivity and exile – is true for the Magi in Herod’s day – and true for God’s people today. But these are all a microcosm of what the Lord has promised – a glimpse of the glory of the Lord that is yet to come.

Have you ever stopped to consider that these words of Isaiah also speak of Christ’s return on the Last Day – “when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him”? (St. Matthew 25:31)

We sit here in the darkness of this world – surrounded by all manner of evil and wickedness – and confessing the darkness of our own sinfulness. “The true Light, which enlightens everyone” has come into the world – Christ, the Light of the world, has come to His own, “and His own people did not receive Him.” (John 1:9-11)

From where we sit, everything seems to be getting darker – and so we fail to consider that Christ will come again in glorious light – a day of exceeding joy for all who are His redeemed children. On that Day you will see what is hidden now – what Isaiah preaches into your ears – “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

God, in His Holy Word, reveals the Last Day – and yet, it’s hard to imagine what it will be like. What is now hidden will be brought into the light – no darkness, no deception, no hiding from the truth, or from the Lord.

On that Day, the “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” St. Paul says it this way in Philippians 2: “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.” (v. 10-11)

All people, without exception – will confess the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord – but like Herod, all without faith in Jesus will do so in fear. It will not be for their benefit. But for those who are in Christ by faith – it will be a Day of exceedingly great joy.

Can you imagine that picture – of all believers being gathered to Christ? Like the magi, coming and falling down to worship Him? “The wealth of the nations” shall come to Him – not the gifts that we bring – but rather an epiphany, the manifestation that all things are already His – the abundance of His “very good” creation – even the new heavens and the new earth that He promises to us.

When the days are darkest, we long even more for the glory of that day. We pray that the Lord would come quickly – to take us out of this misery and death – into His glorious presence and the life without end.

For now, we sit in darkness – and things are hidden. Thanks be to God that He reveals His glory to us in these days. His true glory is His grace – that He would sacrifice His very own Son to redeem you – to rescue you from the darkness of the evil one – to enlighten you with His gifts.

Indeed, like the magi, we rejoice with exceedingly great joy to behold the Christ Child as He comes to us in Word and Sacraments. The glory of the Lord is here! That is to say – the Lord Himself is here!

He comes preaching good news that liberates those-captive-to-sin and returns them to their Father in heaven. He comes to feed and nourish and strengthen you who have been brought out of exile – leading you to the Father’s land. Already the glory of the Lord shines upon you – not yet do you see the fullness of His glory.

But you will. And on that Day – with all the believers, from north and south, east and west, those once dead and now alive – you will behold your Savior, face to face.

“Amen! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness! We are yearning For the day of Your returning!”

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.