

I have a little bit of a confession to make.

In the past, when preaching on Christmas Eve and describing our mental image of the Christmas story I haven't always been completely accurate to the biblical text.

I talked about the shepherds and angels and Mary and Joseph and the baby and all that was right out of Luke, but I also have mentioned the star.

The star is never mentioned in Luke's Gospel.

That particular detail comes from Matthew's Gospel and is connected with the visit of the Wisemen to the baby Jesus.

That's the story of the Epiphany and that's what we're celebrating this morning.

Epiphany means reveal or bring to light.

So when we have an epiphany all that means is that the light bulb came on.

In the reading from the Old Testament this morning, that's exactly what Isaiah talks about.

He talks about the light coming on in the world.

He says darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples.

As a prophet he's talking from the perspective of the people who returned from exile in Babylon to the promised land.

The Persian king Cyrus had let the people of Israel go home after he conquered Babylon.

They went back with great hopes, but found that the walls had been pulled down and the destruction was significant.

They found that Jerusalem was not much more than a ruin.

And they set about the work of restoration, but it was hard going.

Not only that, but they were still relatively few in number and so there was no real sense of security.

Isaiah told them that the future was dark, it would not get easier and there would probably be a certain amount of suffering that would take place.

They would face conquerors, famines, troubles and rebellion.

The future for the people of God would be dark indeed.

Now we know all about the darkness don't we?

We've seen some of the darkest moments in history.

We've seen the darkness continue to roll through our world day after day and year after year.

We've seen the darkness deepen in places like Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Sudan and Somalia.

We've seen the darkness of intolerance show up in places like France, Denmark and other European countries.

We've seen the darkness of environmental degradation taking its toll, affecting the weather and causing violent storms and natural disasters.

We've seen the darkness of scandal and dishonesty surface in the corporate world and in government.

We've seen the darkness of crime, poverty and hatred continue to creep through our communities.

We definitely know about the darkness in our world.

I think we also have a more intimate knowledge of the darkness, because there are those dark corners in our own lives.

Those places of anger, selfishness, hatred, unfaithfulness, intolerance, and apathy.

They are the corners we like to keep dark and tucked away, but every so often they get the better of us.

Every so often we stumble into one of those dark corners or even walk in there purposely and the result is often broken relationships, nasty fights, and isolation.

I think we've all had that experience where we have said something or done something that is completely out of character, that shows a completely different picture of who we are, a darker picture.

We've had that experience where others, especially loved ones, haven't necessarily said it, but we knew they were disappointed in us.

The truth is that the darkness isn't just external to us, it's not just something that happens to us and other people, but it is something that comes from within us and touches the lives of those around us.

We know all about darkness.

The darkness that is visited on us by others, and the darkness that wells up inside of us and bursts into the lives of others.

Through Isaiah, God told the people of Israel to arise and shine.

Imagine that, stuck in the darkness of a very difficult rebuilding project without security, stuck in a world where darkness covered everything and thick darkness hung over all people.

Imagine God telling them to arise and shine.

In telling them to arise and shine, God was not telling them to do anything really odd.

He wasn't telling them to glow or cover themselves in shiny bobbles.

What God was telling them to do, was to live, to live faithfully, to rebuild their city and their temple, to worship him and go about the business of being the people of God.

God was telling them to live their lives as he had told them to live them and that was all.

In doing that they would show the light of God to the world.

In simply existing and living their lives, they would show the whole world that their God was the God, because as a small group, as a tiny nation they survived and thrived where others couldn't.

Their existence was a testimony to the power of God working in the world.

By living their lives in covenant with God, they showed that their God was the most powerful around, in fact that their God was the only God and anybody who worshipped another god was just lost in the dark.

The reality was that the light came from God and the people of Israel simply had to reflect that light into the world by living their lives as God told them to.

Now, that was all well and good for the people of Israel, but still left the Gentiles in the dark.

But God had plans for the whole of humanity, not just the people of Israel.

God had plans to bring the light of his presence into the lives of all people and that's something that is alluded to in this passage of Isaiah when he says Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

The star that the magi followed broke the darkness to guide them to Jesus.

It pointed to the dawn that was breaking over the whole earth as Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem.

He is the glory of Israel and a light to the Gentiles.

Through Christ, God brought the light of his presence to all the peoples of the world.

That's how God has brought the light of his presence into our lives.

Jesus shatters the darkness and brings light to our lives.

The gifts that the wisemen gave to Jesus bring his identity to light for us.

Jesus is the son of God and the gift of frankincense reveals that to us.

In him is the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity.

In a very real way Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth and brings the heavenly light of God's presence into the darkness to help us find our way through life.

Jesus is our king and the gift of gold illuminates us to that reality.

He rules our lives with the light of his love and shows us the way of life, with love at the centre of all that we do.

Jesus is our saviour and the gift of myrrh enlightens us to that truth.

Myrrh, an embalming spice, points to Christ's sacrifice on the cross where he shattered the darkness of sin and death and gave us the of hope of entering the eternal light of heaven.

The gifts that the wisemen brought shed light on Christ's role in bringing light to our lives.

As faithful children of God, we too are called to arise and shine.

We're called to throw off the cloak of darkness and sin and to put on the armour of light.

Like the Israelites that doesn't mean that we need to cover ourselves in shiny stuff or find a way to produce our own light.

The way that we shine is by reflecting the heavenly brilliance of Christ into the world.

What that means is living, living faithfully, living with Christ as our king and God and saviour.

It means loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

That's how the light comes on in our world.

When we live that way God's light shines into the darkness of our world and destroys hatred, hopelessness and disharmony.

When we live as those who are loved and ruled and saved by Christ, God's light shines into the dark corners of our lives bringing forgiveness, mercy, love and light to them and destroying their power to get the best of us.

We know all about the darkness in our world, but Christ has come and his glory is over all of us.

So as we look forward to a New Year let us live faithfully and shine so that others may see our good works and glorify our father in heaven.

Thanks be to God.