

Light at the End of the Tunnel
By: Robert Dodd, December 12, 2018

Apocalypse Now

Ref: Isaiah 49:6 - Prophecy

It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you a light to the nations (Gentiles, i.e., gowyim) that you may be my salvation unto the ends of the earth.

Ref: Matthew 24:29 - Apocalypse

Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven will be shaken...

I have often thought that the Liturgical Calendar, developed by the catholic tradition, is one of the most ingenious adaptations of teaching ever devised by the Christian Church. It enables us to revisit a perpetual cycle of remembrance of the story of faith, transmitted to us by Prophets and Apostles, which leads us to the mystery of Christ's incarnation and his redemptive mission to Humanity at large.

I was profoundly influenced in my university days by my New Testament studies professor, Bob Haywood, (who also served as a Presbyterian minister on campus). He taught that the Greek word "prophet" (prophetas), referred to an inspired speaker or poet rather than to the concept of an "oracle, seer, or a mystic predictor of the future." A prophet is a person who speaks to the issues and challenges of "The Day", specifically in the here and now.

Bob also offered insight into the meaning of "Apocalypse" as a traditional biblical literary form that spoke in symbolic terms about the "big picture" of the struggle of Light against Darkness; of Good against Evil; of Tribulation leading to Triumph; of the last stand of the forces of darkness as God's Eternal Dominion banishes death

and wipes the tears from the eyes of suffering Humanity. We will address this momentarily in the Gospel of Matthew.

On the whole, Isaiah spoke to the issues of his day, about the failures and travails of the Nation of Israel, about the cause and effect of a nation's ethical responsibility, and about behavior and its consequences. However, if one reads the context of today's citation in Isaiah, the text reveals that God conceived the Nation of Israel as an instrumentality of a higher purpose: namely, as a means to enlighten ALL the Nations of the earth, bringing redemption and salvation not only to the remnant of the House of Jacob, but to the "gowyim" (Gentiles), the non-Jews, the human family who were not party to the Covenant between God and Abraham.

Now, as we reconsider the liturgical cycle of this day, we are contemplating the Advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our meditation transports us back to the days and seasons before the Incarnation of Christ, in which we anticipate the 'light at the end of the tunnel', but see it only as a dim point of light far off. Isaiah foresees "a Light to all the nations" but only from afar.

In this moment of the Liturgical season, Advent allows us to anticipate the Light as a barely-perceptible flicker, from a distance very much as Isaiah did, without the benefit of hindsight as 20/20.

Apocalypse Now: Matthew 24

The New Testament reading is one that speaks to me personally. As a childhood survivor of a home torn asunder by the mental illness of my father, a profound exposure to fundamentalist religion left a painful impression on my life. Therefore, I do not marvel that the postmodern Church has shifted to a lighter method of interpretation with less emphasis on Judgement and Condemnation, and more emphasis on personal growth and community service.

As with all scriptural references, we ask God to grant us understanding of the deeper truths that lie in the more troubling citations of the Holy Writ.

I have long thought that although the apocalyptic texts are both disturbing and problematic, that they do not understate the "great tribulation" that humanity suffers (and has always suffered) on a worldwide scale. As in the instance of Matthew Chapter 24, it matters little whether we imagine the apocalypse in the depravity of Roman emperors, in the cruelty of the Saracen slave trade, in the impudence of the Crusades, in the sadism of the Spanish Inquisition, in the savagery of human sacrifice of Meso-America, or in the despotism of today's narcotic drug-lords and human traffickers.

For: "Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven will be shaken..."

And they shall be shaken because the Great Tribulation has always been with us and always will be until we take a deep and meaningful look inside our hearts and minds and make an irrevocable choice for Light, against its grim alternative.

I do not think that the prophetic and apocalyptic utterances should be seen so much in terms of futurity as in a steady state Here and Now. (And this is how I personally understand Matthew 24, Revelations, or any other heavily symbolic text).

The kingdom of heaven is not about tomorrow, it's about Now, because the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. When does Christ come in glory? not tomorrow but today if our ears are finely tuned to the message of reconciliation and love. When does the abomination that makes desolate hold court on the holy Temple Mount? It will reign there as long as violence and hatred reign supreme in the Holy Land. When does the Apocalypse end and Christ's Eternal Dominion begin? When turn our backs on darkness and reach out to the light.

Yes indeed, this is Advent and we are in the process of understanding the Anticipation of the Light, but also we are in the rare position, unlike Isaiah, that we do in fact experience hindsight as 20/20; for we know that 2000 years ago, John the Evangelist proclaimed:

"In him was life, and the life was the light of Humanity, and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

For us, this is the "Light at the end of the tunnel." Let us anticipate it with great joy as we progress through the Advent Season.