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The Light of Christ

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Part of what we celebrate at Epiphany is the early Christian understanding that, with the birth of Christ, a new light has come into the world. Just as lighting a lamp, turning on a light in a darkened room enables you to see what's there and navigate your way more clearly, so the church proclaims that seeing in the light of Christ enables a truer, clearer apprehension of life and its meaning.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines an 'epiphany' as a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand or become conscious of something that really matters. Like an 'aha' moment. Christianity proclaims that Jesus is the world's 'aha' moment – oh, that's what it's all about; oh – he's what God means; oh – this is the true shape of human being and sociality. Christ, says Ephesians, is 'the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things'. The Christian vocation is to make known this mystery, so that everyone has the opportunity to 'walk in the light'.

There's a way of hearing and talking about this vocation that can sound dangerously patronising and colonising. As if 'we' have or possess the light, while others don't; as if the wisdom and understanding of other traditions counts for little, or is even completely discounted (as in rhetoric of 19th century Christian missions about 'benighted natives'). This makes the inherently evangelising impulse of our tradition double-edged.

On the one hand, the desire to share the light signifies taking other people seriously. It reflects a profound sense of the oneness of the human family – a desire that all know and share in the good news revealed by Christ. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul speaks of Christ as the world's peace: he 'has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us'. He has created one new humanity, revealed us all to be equally members of the household of God. On the other hand, however, this proclamation of human 'oneness' has all too often been made solely on 'our' terms –

as if we're the haves, sharing with the have-nots. As if the price of entry to the new sociality means them coming to think and live just as we do.

So how can we disentangle proclamation of the universality of the gospel, Christ as a 'light to all the nations', from damaging pretensions to Christian cultural superiority or domination?

Well... if Christ is the world's 'aha' moment, a light that helps us make sense of being human so as to enable the life of earth, then faith proclaims he can do this for anyone, anywhere. He is a gift for the whole world – because he communicates something essential about life's meaning and purpose, about the fullness of human being. At the same time, each culture, each time and place, and each one of us must discover how this is so ... how his presence, his forgiveness, his Spirit transforms the particular blockages of our lives and help us see ourselves and others more truly. This is a discovery that can never be coerced or coercive. Christ will always challenge aspects of human culture; and he's compatible with whatever is 'good and true and lovely' in any culture. Paul writes of bringing to the Gentiles 'news of the *boundless riches* of Christ' and of his calling 'to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that the wisdom of God *in its rich variety* might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places'. This is universality, without uniformity.

And what is this plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God? What is the wisdom of God revealed in Christ that enlightens all humanity? The mystery is that we are loved. That all things 'are rooted and grounded in love'. That love is the meaning and truth of it all. The light Christ shines is the presence and action of boundless love in human form. Our calling is to see everything, everyone in the light of this love, to be transformed by it, to share it with others, so that all peoples and all places may be at peace. Or, as Paul puts it: 'that we may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God'. Amen