

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"

When I read the Old Testament books after the book of Joshua, I am rather struck by just how absent God seems to be to the people of Israel. After the majestic deeds He accomplishes through Moses in leading the Israelites to the promised land, a number of generations later, a huge number of Israelites have completely forgotten the law of Moses and both law and temple worship need to be recovered and re-introduced. There is something important even in Deuteronomy about never forgetting what God has accomplished even in generations past. The deeds of God are repeated from generation to generation and of course, when this does not happen you end up with generations who have never learnt about God. I am always very moved when I read the book of Nehemiah when a generation who have not heard the law of God have it read to them for the first time and they are overjoyed and bless God for it. It can be easy to think of the whole of the biblical era as being completely filled with miraculous deeds accomplished by a God who is always actively talking to His people and then feel disillusioned by how distant He feels in reality and in our everyday lives. The great events of the nativity we have just celebrated, the epiphany, even the passion and resurrection can be reduced in our minds to a myth of days past, just as the stories of Moses were simply stories retold. But the point is not to recall a past event and to see God only in that event. God's providence encompasses every moment of history and every person in history.

In the first reading, Isaiah exclaims "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." It is quite easy to see how this is fulfilled by the incarnation of our Lord. St. John states that the Word was life and that this life was the light of men which has shone in the darkness, which darkness cannot overcome. The nations come bringing gold and frankincense quite clearly is a prophesy fulfilled by the wise men who bring gifts having come from foreign lands following the light of a star. Isaiah's prophesy is fulfilled by this certain event in history, some past event which we are recalling. Indeed it is of great importance to remember such an event and celebrate it, blessing God for how He has worked. However, we are called to see that this event is a light for us even today. That Christ became man is the coming of the light and the glory of the Lord even today. By remembering and recalling the event in history, we are drawn into the significance of it even today in a way which is greater than only memory. The liturgy in a particular way exemplifies this.

When we hear the word of God read and preached on, we hear about prophesies, events, and wise sayings from the past, but the Holy Spirit transforms these into words which are alive and active even for us as we listen. Just as the words of the Old Testament found fruition in the revelation of Christ, the words of scripture, by the gift of grace work an effect on us to draw us into the mystery of Christ Himself. I must say, I myself often take the words read at mass for granted. I often listen to the first couple of lines think "ah yes it's that story, nice, I like that" and then ignore the reading and in doing so I neglect the working of the spirit because I have reduced the story to just a story with no relevance to me. Yet, the liturgy itself teaches us that the words of Christ in scripture have real effect today when repeating the words of Christ, the actions of the priest bring about the real sacramental presence of Jesus.

I do think we can be like those Israelites in the time of Nehemiah. Perhaps we have taken the words of scripture for granted, going to mass regularly. Perhaps we reduce them to stories. Perhaps we listen to them only for "cool" insights. Maybe we don't listen to them at all. The Church is in a tension between having the victory already won by Christ, while also struggling and groaning for the second coming of Christ. We are in many ways still in darkness, but the words of scripture read to us each time at mass are themselves the light of

Christ which shone, and now shines in the darkneses we face. Let us pray to the Spirit to make us attentive to the words of scripture so that they may be a light for us as we journey to see Christ who is our light, face to face in the life to come.

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