

"Christ, The World's True Light"

YEARS AGO, my daughter Cherie was quite dismayed. She had just purchased a shiny red car, which she treasured as her "pride and joy." One evening she drove her new car to a shopping mall, where she ate dinner as the sun set.

When my daughter returned to her car later, she was horrified to discover that someone had re-painted it. Can you imagine that? Instead of being shiny and red, her new car was now an ugly, dirt brown color.

My daughter couldn't imagine who would do such a thing--or how they could have done it in such a short period of time.

Crestfallen, my daughter got into her car and began to drive it away. Then suddenly, it dawned on her. The culprit was actually the lighting in that parking lot. The sodium vapor lights in that lot, had dramatically transformed her car from a thing of joy, into a drab heap of metal.

NO DOUBT you've had similar experiences in shopping. The shirt or blouse which looked so good in the store, had a much difference appearance in the natural light outdoors. Under the store's fluorescent lights, it seemed to be just the color you wanted. But when you got it home, it wasn't the same at all.

We in our modern age tend to take light for granted. Every day we wake up to a brand new day of the sun's light. And with just the flick-of-a-switch, our modern technology can have light shine virtually anywhere we want on earth--in the deepest caves to the highest mountains.

We tend to take light for granted. But not only that, we also tend to assume that all light is virtually the same. Thus, my daughter didn't realize at first, the effect of vapor lighting on her car.

In fact, there are different kinds of light which make the objects they shine on, appear different. And, as objects appear different, we humans may well respond to them differently.

For example, my daughter loved a shiny red car. But, a washed-out dirt brown car, was far less appealing to her.

I'VE LIVED ON THE SEA COAST almost all my life. During that time, I never paid much attention to jellyfish. For the most part, I had only thought of jellyfish as creatures to be avoided, because of their stinging tentacles.

However, during one of our summer vacations, my wife Chris and I had the

opportunity to visit the world famous, salt water aquarium in Monterey, California. There they had a display of simple jellyfish, but with this difference.

The lighting conditions in that display allowed those jellyfish to show their photoluminescence. One saw that their undulating bodies and tentacles were delicately ringed with beautiful points of white light--points of light, which made those jellyfish look almost ghostlike, against the deep blue backdrops of their large, salt water tanks.

I had never seen jellyfish under such lighting conditions before. But now that their stunning photoluminescence was revealed, I quickly developed a far greater appreciation for those sea creatures, than I had ever had before.

AS YOU KNOW, rocks sometimes look pretty dull under normal light. However, when some rocks are exposed to ultraviolet light, they suddenly are transformed into brilliant displays of color.

Yes, there are different kinds of light. And those different kinds of light can either enhance or diminish our experience of the world we see around us.

Gertrude Stein once said that "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." In a sense that's true. But in another sense, our perception and appreciation of a rose really depends, in large measure, on the kind of light which shines upon it.

To this point I've been talking about light as a physical phenomenon. I'm going to "shift gears" now, and talk about light metaphorically, as it concerns our human understanding.

AT ITS MOST BASIC LEVEL, I think our earthly existence can be thought of as a dark, unlit path. A dark, unlit path which winds its way, unexpectedly, through many different life circumstances--as that path makes its way into an unknown future.

Suddenly we are born into this world. And suddenly we find ourselves walking on that path. The path seems dark and unlit, because as human beings, our vision is so limited. There is so much we human beings do not understand about our lives.

For example, we don't know where we came from, before we entered this life. We don't really know why we are here on earth. We don't really understand many of the things which happen in this life, especially human tragedies and suffering.

Neither do we have any direct human knowledge as to what lies beyond this life. In fact, our vision of the future is so limited, that none of us can be absolutely certain, what even the very next day will bring.

Will tomorrow bring joy or sadness, comforts or challenges, tranquility or pain, renewed life or death? None of us really knows for sure, until we actually get to tomorrow and experience it.

As human beings, our vision and our understanding are very limited. Nevertheless, we still have to make our way along this dark, winding path called life.

DOWN THROUGH THE CENTURIES, human beings have often fumbled with matches and kindling, in order to create some kind of light, for the journey along this mysterious path called life.

Down through the centuries, humanity has concocted any number of religions and philosophies, to shed some kind of light on our existence in this world.

In fact, the Old Testament portion of our Holy Bible is full of such human attempts to create enlightenment.

As the Old Testament indicates, some ancient people planted sticks on the tops of mountains to worship. Some ancient people fashioned golden calf statues to venerate. Some ancient people crafted little clay statues of gods, which they placed on altars in their homes.

Those ancient people did all those things with the hope, that they could bring light to the mysteries of our existence. They wanted to know such things as:

--Why are we here on earth?

--How can we understand human tragedies and suffering?

--Does anything lie beyond this life? If so, how does it relate to me?"

Those ancient peoples fumbled in the dark with their matches and kindling. But as our Bible indicates, all such human efforts were ultimately bound to fail.

For at best, such efforts could only create false lights. And similar to the vapor lights in our modern parking lots, those false lights often did more to obscure than reveal, the true meaning of that mysterious path, called life, which we humans all journey along.

YOU WILL RECALL the prophet Isaiah's great prophecy for his people. As Isaiah proclaimed:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined...for a child has been born for us, a son given to us.

[Isaiah 9:2,6]

That same idea resounds in the New Testament, at the very start of John's Gospel. For there--as you heard in our scripture reading this morning--

-the Gospel author makes this proclamation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through him...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [John 1:1,3a,c,4,5,9]

Of course, we are used to hearing those words at Christmastime. But consider again that last statement, which the Fourth Gospel author wrote. As he said:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF, Jesus Christ is the world's true light. It is through him, that we humans can see our human existence most clearly, as it really is. According to our faith:

- Jesus Christ is the light who can guide us safely, down life's dark, mysterious path.
- He is the light which reveals every life circumstance in its proper perspective.
- He is the light which enables us to look beyond death's boundary.
- He is the light which truly brings out the radiance, joy, vitality, and beauty of our lives, right here now, in this world.

Do you recall what Jesus once told his followers? He said to them:

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

[John 10:10]

People sometimes ask me, "Does it really make a difference if one is a Christian or not?"

In fact, I think it makes a great deal of difference. For in the true light of Christ, Christians actually see life, and our world, in a way, which is very different, from the way many other people see or life and world. Here I'll give you some examples:

First, in the light of Christ, Christians see how very important forgiveness is. Many other people dismiss forgiveness as an impossible ideal. But we Christians are often stirred to forgive for this reason. We forgive because we realize that God has forgiven us. We recognize, that what God has given us so lavishly, we should not withhold from our fellow human beings.

Second, in the light of Christ, Christians have an extended view of human existence. We know that this world is not all there is. The first Easter taught us that. Therefore, unlike many other people, we need not feel pressure, to turn this life into a "rat race," in which we feel compelled to seek every possible benefit for ourselves, before we die.

Third, in the light of Christ, and unlike many other people, we know that life is more than what we eat or drink or wear. And we know that our loving God will care for us, both in this world, and in the next!

The Apostle Paul summed that understanding up, with these stirring words. As Paul declared:

whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. [Romans 14:8]

This strong belief in the life eternal, really does set Christians apart. In fact, it gives Christians the courage to live and make personal sacrifices, which many others would never dare.

Fourth, in the light of Christ, Christians can find hope and meaning even in suffering. For many people suffering is just a painful dead end. They don't believe any good can ever come out of it.

Christians repudiate suffering as evil. But in the light of Christ--the crucified Christ--we Christians realize that God can bring some good out of even the world's worst evil. And so, where others may be completely broken by suffering, Christians look to find some hope and goodness beyond it.

Fifth, in the light of Christ, Christians can believe in themselves. Whereas others may be tormented with self-doubts, we Christians know that even with our many flaws, we still are worthwhile persons who are precious to God. For as Christians realize, it was because God so loved our world, that God sent us God's only son.

As Christians understand, that gift and that love, are tremendous affirmations of humankind. In fact, that gift and love show us, just how preciousness, each and every human life is to God.

LIGHT REALLY DOES make a difference in our lives. It can turn a shiny red car, ugly dirt brown--or vice versa. It can turn the humble jellyfish into a delicate creature of undulating beauty. The right kind of light can even make a dull, old rock sparkle.

Of course, the best light for us humans, is the light that came into our world to enlighten us all. For, without that light, our lives would be far different. But with the light of Christ illuminating our earthly paths, our lives are so much more vital, radiant, joyful, and filled with the beauty God intended, when God first created us humans.

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