

THE DECISIVE BREAKTHROUGH OF LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

*“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
has not overcome it”.*

(John 1:5)

In the Igreja Reformada, the Reformed Church, in Maragogi, Brazil, you can find the first words of this passage from John 1: 5 on the wall behind the pulpit: “a luz resplandece nas trevas,” the light shines in the darkness. When I saw those words there, I was moved. Brazil certainly is a place of ignorance and poverty, indeed of darkness. And yet, also there, it is publicly testified and confessed that “the light shines in the darkness.”

Christmas in Brazil is of course quite different from Christmas in Canada. Most people there do not have the money to give presents to one another. There often is no special Christmas dinner. You will not find snow or mistletoe, nor are there many colourful lights and decorated trees to mark the festive season. We did see in the large shopping centres – already in November – the odd ribbon decoration, but for the common people these centres are virtually inaccessible.

Do you think that these people really miss much? In a country that is largely dominated by Roman Catholicism, the birth of Christ will certainly be celebrated in various rituals, although in a more sober manner than in Europe and North America. It may be that, in the absence of rampant commercialism, for some the real truth of Christmas will become clearer. For indeed, the light shines in the darkness.

FROM ETERNITY AND HEAVEN

The text from which I took these words is from the Gospel according to John. As you know, John starts his version of the Gospel in a manner quite different from that of Matthew and Luke. We find no mention of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, angels and shepherds, Herod and the wise men. The birth of Christ is not described at all.

John does not start in the fields of Ephratah but in the spacious expanse of heaven: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He does not begin with a certain point in time, but with eternity. John provides a deep perspective and a broad outlook, and lets us see that the coming of Christ into the world is of cosmic, world-encompassing significance.

The Gospel of John is from the start majestic. When Jesus was born, John writes, the true light was entering the world. Christmas is a key moment, a decisive occurrence in the history of the world.

The eternal Word, the everlasting Light became flesh.

LEADING TO A DECISION

John shows us that Christ comes from eternity as the great Light that always was present, and that now decisively breaks through in this world. There is a sharp antithesis: if you have Christ, you are in the Light; if not, you are in the darkness. This means that the coming of Christ places all people before a key *decision*. Christ Himself saw His ministry as being final and conclusive.

Listen to the terms in which He spoke of Himself, as recorded by John: I am the Bread of Life. I am the Light of the world. I am the Door. I am the Good

Shepherd. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am the true Vine. I AM. I am all this and more. We do not gather on Christmas day to party. We celebrate the victory of Light over darkness, the birth of Him Who said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me.” It is with this message in mind that John was instructed to write the Gospel. He proclaims the birth of Jesus Christ as the decisive breakthrough of the Light into the darkness. He writes about the constant presence and the mighty victory of that Light.

LIGHT AND LIFE

The apostle John often uses the word “light” to describe Christ and His ministry, and employs the contrasting term “darkness” to describe this world which lies in the power of sin and death. Light versus darkness, it is a constantly returning motif in John’s Gospel (we meet it at least 23 times!).

The word “light” is sometimes used in the same context as the word life. Light and life go together. That is so in nature: if there is no (sun)light, nothing can flourish; everything must die. And what applies to nature applies to the spiritual realm. As darkness is symbolic of God’s judgment and of death (think of the darkness in Egypt), so light is symbolic of God’s grace and mercy (think of Goshen). Life and light go together.

When John writes, “the light shines in the darkness” (verse 5), he has in the previous verse already used the word *life*. Let’s look at that: “In Him [the Word that became flesh, the Son of God incarnate] was life and the life was the light of men.”

In Him was life. When John uses the word “life” (also a term frequently met in his Gospel), it is often a reference to everlasting life. When he says that “in Christ is life,” he means that Christ has life in Himself, since He is God almighty and eternal, the Creator. It also means that He *imparts* life to others, graciously gives life. And this does not just refer to His gift of temporal life and breath to all creatures, but it means that He alone can and does give to people the gift of everlasting life.

The text continues: the life was the light of men (verse 4). This means that “men” (people) can only see (live, walk, function) through the life which Christ imparts to them. What makes people tick, what keeps them going and enables them to progress is the light of God, who takes them up in his fellowship and covenant.

The truth of the matter is, says John, that people can only really live through Christ (in Him was life) and can only function in fellowship with Him (the life was the light of men). It is through Christ alone that people live and function. It has always been so and it will always be so.

DARKNESS AND DEATH

John writes that the light shines in the darkness. We know from Scripture how darkness came into the world. There was the fall into sin, with the resulting curse on creation. The kingdom of the earth became a kingdom of darkness, governed by

the prince of darkness, the devil. People who were meant to live through Christ and in Him with God, now came to live for themselves and by themselves.

Darkness descended. Now do not think that after the fall all was dark. For, says John: the light shines in the darkness, and he means that this light shone also from the beginning. He writes: the light *shines* (present tense). That means: it is constantly and always shining. John does not want us to get the impression that there was no light until Christmas Day, as if Christ was not active before then. On the contrary, looking at things from the perspective of the beginning, he says, the light shines in the darkness of the ages.

LIGHT VERSUS DARKNESS

The light shines in the darkness. We must realize that “light and darkness” are two contrasting and mutually exclusive powers. They cannot co-exist. The one always seeks to overpower and destroy the other. Light opposes darkness and expels it. Wherever the light shines, the darkness must draw back. Similarly, wherever the light recedes, the darkness takes its place. You cannot really be in the twilight, you are either in the light or in the dark.

When there is light, you can see, discern, look ahead, and therefore also move ahead. Light is a condition for progress and motion. Light means that you have fellowship with your surroundings. But if it is dark, you cannot see, you do not make progress, you stumble and fall. You are out of touch with your environment.

What John is saying, then, is this: in the beginning was the Word, the Son of God. He not only gave life, but He is also the Light which shone from the beginning. He is the one Who enables the people of God to progress in their life with God and with each other. Christ has always been the Light of the world.

ALWAYS LIGHT

After the fall into sin, when everything seemed utterly dark, God came with the Gospel of salvation by promising the seed of the woman. The light shines in the darkness! When the “first world” perished in the flood, and again all seemed dark, God saved Noah and his family. When people rebelled against God at Babel, God dispersed them and called Abraham, promising to make him into a great nation. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, God led them out from there with a mighty hand. He surrounded them with His light. And when the people of Israel fell away from Him in the time of the Judges, He raised up David, the theocratic king. When the dark era of the exile had come, He brought back a remnant, which He protected, so that Jesus Christ would be born. The light shines in the darkness! When we look at the history of the church as described in Scripture, we see that the light shone brightest when everything seemed to be plunged into utter darkness.

PREPARING FOR THE INCARNATION

And all this happened because of what John describes in verse 9: the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. In all this previous history,

Christ was preparing for His incarnation, for His birth on Christmas Day. The true light was coming into the world, John says, the light that is real light and not some temporary, artificial product. It is the light that enlightens every man, that is: the light upon which everyone depends for true direction and progress.

The understanding of Christmas does not begin at the manger of Bethlehem, but in the Garden of Eden. The real struggle of the darkness against the light dates from that time. And the victory of the Light was already assured at that time.

For John adds, “and the darkness has not overcome it.” The light shines victoriously. And you may believe that the darkness did what it could to dim it. Darkness cannot stand light and must battle it. And so the devil and all powers that are against God did everything in their power to prevent the continuation and spread of the light! The devil wants darkness. When it is dark, evil creatures, predators can move about freely to seek their prey.

PEOPLE PREFER DARKNESS

John expands on this thought in chapter 3: 19-21. He has said that the light has come into the world but adds that “men loved darkness rather than light.” People prefer darkness! Can you imagine that? What kind of people prefer darkness? Only those who want to do evil. That’s what John says: people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. Mankind needs darkness as a cover-up for sin. John writes, “For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

The light exposes evil. When we are examined in the brilliant light of Christ and His Word, every spot and blemish is visible and we are seen in all our ugliness and filth. And since people cannot stand this, they do their utmost to have the light snuffed out. Turn off the light! Then no one can see how filthy and evil we are!

You will understand, then, why there has been from the beginning great opposition to this light. In our text John says that the darkness tries to overcome the light. The word that he uses here can be taken in various ways. The King James Version has: and the darkness comprehended it not. Then it would mean: the light did shine, but the darkness could not understand it. In other words, the darkness is not able to receive the light because it is cannot grasp its meaning. One might refer to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: the unspiritual man does not understand the spiritual things of God.

The NIV follows the same kind of translation as the King James Version: the darkness has not understood it, but in a footnote it allows also for the translation: the darkness has not overcome it. The word that is used means “to take hold of” something. The darkness could not take hold of the light. And there is in this verb the notion of holding something down in order to control it. Some have suggested the translation: the light shines. . . and the darkness has not mastered it. That is perhaps, seeing also the context, the proper translation. The darkness did not fail to *understand* the light, but (understanding quite well the implications of the working

of the light) it actively *opposed* the light, trying to control, master, subdue it, and so prevent it from working.

THE LIGHT PREVAILED

The darkness did everything possible to keep the light from shining. Satan transplanted the truth with the lie. He led Israel from true worship of God to idolatry and apostasy. Time and again he caused God's people to stray from the way of truth. In all this, he sought to prevent one thing: the coming of the Son of God into the world. Satan said: the Word shall not become flesh. It will never be Christmas Day.

Satan has attempted to prevent the birth of Christ ever since the fall into sin. Often it seemed that he would succeed. And indeed, except for the covenant promises and the sovereign grace of God, Satan would have succeeded. But he failed. Our text speaks of the great victory of the light. The darkness has not overcome it. Christ entered into our flesh so that He might fulfill all the righteousness of the divine law and redeem us from our sins.

THE DECISIVE BREAKTHROUGH

The birth of Christ is the decisive breakthrough of the light in the darkness. That is how the prophets spoke of it: the people who in darkness walked, have seen a glorious light (Hymn 15, *Book of Praise*). It is also the manner in which Simeon spoke when he saw the baby Jesus: mine eyes have seen thy salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for thy people Israel (Luke 2: 32, Hymn 18: 2).

Christmas means that the light of God, which was always present, has broken through into the world. This has consequences for the world and for us. In John 3: 21 we read, “. . . he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.” Whereas darkness attracts criminals and predators, the light attracts those who love and seek truth and purity. Now that the light has broken through on Christmas Day, we are all faced with a tremendous responsibility: can my life stand the scrutiny by the Son of God? Can I stand in that light? Will it be seen that my deeds have been wrought in God? For the light which has broken through on Christmas illuminates everything and shines into the deepest recesses of our life and heart.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

You see, to celebrate Christmas can mean various things: nice, festive season, family get-togethers, Christmas dinner, and what not. But we must realize in the midst of all this that Christ is the true Light that enlightens every man, and when the question is asked, “Can you stand in that light?” you must be able to answer, “Yes! I have nothing to hide. I am attracted to that light. Let it shine, also in my life.” When you do what is true *you come* to the light, and do what can be seen in the light. You do not try to overcome the light, but indeed comprehend it, take it up

within yourself, so that it illuminates you, and you become one of the children of light.

I want to conclude this section on the Light with another passage of Scripture that is closely related to our text. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Jesus is the Light of the world. That is number one. That always comes first. But Jesus said to His disciples: you are the light of the world. *You* are (Matthew 5: 14). That is number two. That always follows. To celebrate Christmas means to take up the light of Christ into ourselves by faith through His Spirit and to be light-bearers ourselves. We must reflect the light of Christ. Christmas does not have meaning for just one day, but for all of life.

The light shines in the darkness, and it shines on you, so that you may reflect it in your surroundings. Do you know what we are called in the Bible? Children of Light. We must shine as lights in the world. Never mind the lights on the Christmas tree. Our whole street is lit up with colourful lights, but that's all artificial. If only everyone who lives on our street would reflect the light of Christ. Paul writes: you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light. And the fruit of light is found in all that is good, according to God's law.

Satan and the world still oppose the light. Satan, we are warned, does so, even though he often disguises himself as an angel of light. Now that we live in the age of the true Light, we must all the more show ourselves to be children of light, and discern the spirits in the light of God's Word. Watch out for the prince of darkness who pretends to be an angel of light and seeks to turn you away from the Word of God. That is the calling which comes to us when we celebrate Christmas.

Soon the Christmas lights in our street will go out. The Christmas trees will be dumped in the driveway for pick-up by the trash company. The festive atmosphere disappears. Don't let the light go out in your house. Keep the festive atmosphere. Otherwise you've had only a worldly Christmas. Believe in the light and walk in it. And do not fear the powers of darkness: God is my light, my refuge, my salvation, whom shall I fear? (Psalm 27).

Sometimes it can seem so dark, also in the life of Christians. Sometimes it may seem that you cannot progress, that there is no way out of the difficulties. You may say: I cannot see a way, O Lord! But Jesus says: there was always light. And especially now, since Christmas, the light has broken through. Do not be afraid of the darkness. Do not hide in it, either. Keep coming to the light. For the darkness could not and cannot win. The light shines, forever, also in your life. Receive it, believe it, work with it, and so reflect it!

God is my light. One day we will see a light that is unimagined. The book of Revelation speaks about the new Jerusalem and says: the city had no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk.

One day no more darkness or powers of darkness, but light everywhere. Also for me. There is the mighty victory of the light, of which Christmas is the

assurance. In that victory we may stand every day in all our trials and defeats. God is my Light. Whom should I fear?