

Jesus Christ, the Light of the world

Father Dale Lauderville/CNS

When we see the first rays of light at dawn, we know that a flood of light soon will inundate the world around us. The clear, dark nighttime sky quietly and quickly will become azure.

The first appearance of light at dawn each day reflects the consequence of God's command on the first day of creation in Genesis 1: "Let there be light." This light came forth even before God created the sun (an event that happened later in the Genesis account, on creation's fourth day).

As his first act of creation, God seems to have made light a spiritual reality with qualities reflecting his own being. Light makes its presence felt immediately by its capacity to penetrate and envelop things. It not only illuminates and reveals, but also promotes good order and peace.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as "the light of world" (8:12). He gives life and guidance to those who receive him.

The birth of Jesus created controversy. Those who did not want his light to reveal their collusion with darkness, rejected him (John 3:19-21). A battle between light and darkness was fought on a field where the determining force was the power of choice. Those who accepted him were empowered to become children of God (John 1:12).

This battle between light and darkness has continued down through the generations in the hearts of those who encounter Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8; 1 John 1:5-7). Vital as this battle is to the salvation of individuals and their communities, the outcome of the battle on a cosmic level already has been determined: Christ won the victory. His light has banished the powers of darkness (Colossians 1:15-20; 2:15).

We humans, caught in the struggle between the forces of light and darkness, need to be transformed by Christ's light.

At the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John were overcome by the sight of the glorified Jesus; "His face shone forth like the sun and his clothes became white like light" (Matthew 17:2). Jesus allowed these three privileged disciples to see beyond his human form to catch a glimpse of his di-



Illustration by Joan Hyme/CNS

vine nature. They fell to the ground, overcome with awe. This type of encounter with the glorified Christ as overpowering light also happened to St. Paul on his journey to Damascus (Acts 22:6-9).

The light of the glorified Christ illumined these Apostles at the heart of their being, so as to guide and strengthen their minds and their wills.

The Israelite people, whose very identity rested on the presence of the Lord among them, yearned to see the light of God's face (Psalm 4:7). They expressed this yearning by going to the temple to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise. There they could find their lives renewed through communion with God.

Such communion also was expressed in terms of light: "In your light we see light" (Psalm 36:10). God's life-giving presence cannot be contained in

a place, an object or an idea; it engulfs. There is nowhere to take cover from this God. The psalmist proclaims that when God is near "the night becomes bright like day; darkness becomes like light" (Psalm 139:12).

This pervasive presence of God is a source of life and consolation for those who seek God. But the prophet Amos challenged his contemporaries who stood in need of reform to recognize that the Lord's appearance for them would be a day "of darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18, 20).

God's light penetrates to the depths of the heart, challenging his people to remain true to the covenant relationship.

When Israel underwent deportation and lost its land to the Assyrians in 721 B.C., the prophet Isaiah tried to lift their sights beyond this devastating experience of judgment to see that the Lord would act again on their behalf. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; upon those sitting in a land of deep darkness a light has shone" (Isaiah 9:1).

Matthew quoted this passage when he introduced Jesus' ministry in Galilee with the call, "Reform, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17).

Those who accept this good news of the coming of God will find that the light of Christ within makes them "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Jesus exhorts his disciples to let their light shine forth before others.

Just as the dawning light seems to arise from beyond the horizon, so the light of Christ that rises within us brings us into communion with the eternal life of God. The glorified Christ filled St. Paul with the conviction that he had overcome death.

The destination of those illumined by the light of Christ is not the dark, gloomy region of Sheol but the new, heavenly Jerusalem. This heavenly city has no need of the sun or the moon because Christ himself constantly gives light to it (Revelation 21:22-24).

Benedictine Father Lauderville is a Scripture scholar at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minn.

Christ shines as God of Light, Lord of Easter

Father Lawrence Boadt/CNS

The Bible opens with the magnificent scene of a primeval world in which everything was "chaotic and empty," and power was in the unrestrained ocean under the control of darkness (Gn 1:2). God's spirit swept over this scene, and God's voice was heard to speak its authority: "Let there be light!" (Gn 1:3). From this command, all creation begins to unfold with the order and beauty of God's intentional design.

The authors of Genesis, like their ancient contemporaries, believed that light was the quality of the divine. One could not look on a god directly because the numinous rays of divine light surrounding the god

would kill a mere human.

Israel believed even more that this was true of the one God, who alone created all things. The fact that God bestowed light on the world as the first act of creation meant this world shared in the very life-force and being of God. Not only were humans to be in the image and likeness of God, but every creation shared in a small way in God's image.

It was Israel's profound belief that her very existence was dependent on God's favor, care and light, and that God had entered into an intimate relationship with his people. Of course, this was qualified by an equally deep awareness that mortal creatures can never hold ourselves equal to God.

In Exodus 33, Moses asks outright to see the glory of God directly and is told that he can behold the light from a safe distance, but may never look on God's face lest he die.

The light of God makes present the power of the divine. In the pillar of cloud and fire, God's light leads the people to salvation, while at the same time blocking and blinding the Egyptians.

Light also expresses the power and insight of the Torah, God's word. When Isaiah cries out, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord," he means "Let us live by the Book of the Law."

Similarly, dawn symbolizes the coming of light by which we can see our way and escape the paralysis of the darkness. Isaiah 8:20 and 9:2 ex-

press hope that God will come as the dawn to bring an end to the darkness of captivity, or oppression, or death.

The great promise of Isaiah is that if Israel is faithful to the Torah, it will become the light for the Gentiles by which they will live and see and come to know God (Is 49:6; 51:4; 60:3).

No wonder the New Testament so often speaks of Christ as the sum of all the Old Testament hopes for God's light, coming to Jew and gentile alike. John 1:4-5 states it clearly: "And that life was the light of the world, and the light shone in the darkness."

Paulist Father Boadt is the publisher of Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J.