

***For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given***  
**Isaiah 9.6**

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*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Is 9:2).*

**When I was a young, I helped with a scripture union camp at Lake Johnson in Central Otago.**

One morning we got up very early to climb a mountain near Queenstown to see the dawn. I think the climb took about three hours. We started in the darkness of night, and gradually the sky began to lighten.

About 10 minutes from the peak you walk around the back of the mountain where you can't see the lake or the horizon.

After an exhausting climb, I reached that turning point and pressed on for the last 10 minutes.

Unfortunately for me, the sun rose on the horizon when I was still behind the peak so I missed the sunrise by about 3 minutes. So near and yet so far – I felt cheated, and had to laugh at myself, all that effort to miss the sunrise by a few minutes.

Still the view was stunning and worth the climb.

**In our reading from Isaiah, the dawn, is a metaphor for hope and salvation.**

This is a word picture we easily understand - the night is dark and then gradually the first light begins to touch the sky.

Steadily the light spreads increasing in brightness. When this happens you know the sun will soon appear with fullness of light, we will feel its warmth and be able to see the world around us.

**I wonder if you have a story about watching a sunrise**, perhaps on a beach with a view across the sea or travelling to some exotic location and enjoying the sunrise there or perhaps looking back to the millennium when you got up early to see the dawn on the first day off the year 2000. Or maybe a little more mundane, perhaps you work the night shift and long for the dawn each morning as sign that your work is nearly over and you can soon go home.

**The darkness of this nation is connected to being conquered by the Assyrians because of their rebellion and disobedience to God.**

The darkness is described at the end of chapter 8 where they have been consulting mediums who have no light to shine on the matter so we read about the people being ... *Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.* (Is 8:20-22).

Looking for answers among the dead, all they find is gloom, fear and distress which become expressed in anger towards God and ends in utter darkness!

**Against this bleak and gloomy background we read,** *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan— The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.* (Is 9:1-2).

Zebulun and Naphtali were regions that had been conquered by the Assyrians and so were places devoid of hope.

The Assyrians had divided the land into three regions,

The land by lake Galilee

The land by the sea

And the Land along the Jordan river.

The places that had been conquered, Zebulun, Naphtali, by the lake, by the sea and by the river – were all disgraced and humiliated by the Assyrians.

Isaiah expresses their predicament poetically calling them a people who walk in darkness and live under the shadow of death.

The oppression of this shadow of death left them burdened, hopeless and joyless.

BUT – even for them a light has dawned, and they have seen its great light.

At dawn there are still long shadows, places in the shade and areas where the gloom of darkness still lingers.

Dawn is not the fullness of the mid-day sun, but it is a sign and a promise of the light to come.

In verse three we see three images of joy:

*You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.*

When the nation prospers, the people can prosper. People find confidence when the nation is doing well. In our modern-day banks survey the confidence and optimism of businesses; and the nation gets a lift when business is booming, people are employed, and when income is steady or even rising.

*they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,*

in ancient times when people were dependant on the seasons, before the harvest food was in short supply, it had been used up during the year and people were waiting on a good harvest so they could eat well.

While we have a more stable supply of food through the year, we are aware that NZ is an agricultural country. We hear when Fonterra is doing well and the price for milk goes up. We hear about it when containers of Kiwi fruit are rejected on the border of China. And those who like cherries at Christmas time will be hoping

there were no early frosts or late hail in Central Otago.

Have you noticed the fruit vans have started appearing on the streets with bargain prices for strawberries and stone fruit?

Even we know what it means to rejoice in the harvest.

*as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.*

This is a bit difficult for us to relate to. In ancient times, having been defeated and plundered, their own goods taken from them, they in turn rejoiced in the defeat of their enemies and could benefit from the spoils of war.

I recently watched a movie, *The best of men*, set in a hospital in WW2.

It was about a spinal unit that helped wounded service men recover or adapt to life following a paralysing injury and told the story of the beginnings of the para-Olympics.

Part way through the story they hear that the war is won and victory is theirs. This is greeted with joyful cheers and celebrations.

Many of you will have seen film or photos of joyful celebrations at the end of that war, with bunting and street parties. This was the joy ancient people had at the end of a war when their oppressors were defeated.

**Verse 5 is similarly joyful as it notes the new freedom** that is theirs as God shatters the burdensome yoke and bars on their shoulders and removes the rod that beat them into submission and which was used to oppress them.

**Verse 6 speaks of casting off the clothes of war,** when the warrior's boots and uniform are no longer needed, but can be destroyed and used as fuel for the fire.

**These verses are like a crescendo,**

Beginning almost imperceptibly with the first light of the dawn, gradually increasing tempo as oppressed people begin to sense their freedom, breaking the oppressor's yoke, the growing joy and the casting aside of the warriors bloody clothing, reaching its peak in the herald of peace and the great light that is celebrated

saying, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, ...*

Hear the echo of this in John's gospel, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son*, (Jn 3:16).

**This is God's answer – this is God's plan – a child is born.**

Every child is special, but this one more so.

This is a son who is given to us; the son of God taking flesh and becoming one of us.

This child resolves the gloom, despair and brokenness of the world.

Again there are echoes in John's gospel when he says Jesus was *the light that shines in the darkness*, and that, *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world*. (Jn 1:9).

This child brings light and is the bearer of hope.

**Isaiah reveals who this child is and what he will be like by the titles he receives.**

**Wonderful Counsellor** – this points to the wisdom of the messiah who has the depth of understanding that is needed to rule well. Other kings may need to surround themselves with wise advisors, but this King does not need their

council, he is able to govern by his own insights and wisdom.

**Mighty God** – this indicates the power of the messiah who has strength to rule. The messiah is no ordinary king, he is God. This is not a human sovereign with human failings, he is divine.

**Everlasting Father** – Giving the messiah the title father is a bit confusing for modern day Christians who have a developed sense of the Trinity, where Jesus the messiah is the son. But Isaiah didn't think in terms of the trinity and he is not trying to make a Trinitarian statement. Isaiah is revealing something of the messiah's nature – he has a familial relationship with his subjects, and treats them in a fatherly way. This can be translated Father forever, pointing to his eternal nature.

So it speaks of the eternal relationship and close family connection we have with the messiah.

**Prince of Peace** – this speaks of the nature of the messiah as the one who brings peace. Not a prince of war, not a prince of oppression, not a prince of decadence who wastefully squanders the wealth of the kingdom on himself, but the Prince of Peace. He is peace. He provides peace

with God. He brings peace to troubled hearts.  
His kingdom is a place of peace.

He is wonderful, mighty, everlasting,  
peace.

He is Counsellor, God, Father, and Prince.  
Each of these titles gives greater radiance to his  
brightness.

He is wonderful counsellor multiplied by a  
factor of Mighty God, to the power of  
Everlasting Father, times Prince of Peace.

Each of these titles magnifying the nature of the  
light which has dawned with the coming of the  
messiah.

**Not simply a radiant star, but a person, a child, a  
son.**

One, who while having these sublime titles,  
would come among us, as one of us.

A quote I read recently described Jesus saying  
*he was God's face turned towards us in radical  
embrace.*

He is the person who reached out his arms to  
children, gave dignity to women, offered  
forgiveness to all, touched the leper, healed the  
lame and taught amazing truth about God's  
love for all humanity.

He is a personal God who draws near to us, understanding our struggles, sorrows, joys and needs.

He walked with us, sat with us, shared meals with us, laughed with us and cried with us.

This is God, not remote, not disconnected from the reality of human life, but entering into our experience, even to the point of suffering and dying for us.

Jesus spoke compassionately to us saying, *Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.* (Jn 15:13-14).

He calls us friend – for to us a child is born, to us a son is given.

**Advent is a wonderful time to remember and reflect on this ancient prophecy of Isaiah given about 800 years before the birth of Jesus, which speaks to us of the dawning of hope and the coming of the messiah.**

What a long wait this people had, looking for the messiah, the wonderful councillor, mighty God, everlasting Father and prince of peace.

In Advent, leading up to Christmas we remember this, we anticipate it and it renews our hope.

It lifts our spirits.

It reminds us of the story of the birth of Jesus, a story so close to our hearts.

It is the beginning of the story we know so well – the story of the one who has changed every aspect of our lives.

**This is a story to delight in, a story to celebrate and a story to share.**

It makes a difference to our souls.

It makes a difference to how we live our lives.

It makes a difference to our eternity.