

Centuries after the words of Isaiah were spoken we moderns can regard ourselves as fellow travelers with Isaiah's people who walked in darkness and dwelt in a land of gloom. The human condition, we might be tempted to say, has not changed all that much over 20 centuries of war, and want, and selfish disregard for the rights and needs of others. But we know that the birth of Christ has changed the human condition, even though we must admit that the supporting evidence for this assertion of Christmas faith is sometimes hard to find. All the more reason, then, for us to reflect anew on the power of Christmas- a power that disperses darkness and gloom. Isaiah spoke of a people who walked in darkness. His phrase is descriptive of humanity without Christ. The prophet described these folks as dwelling in a land of gloom. Christian tradition has repeated these prophetic phrases down through the ages for the purpose of celebrating the dispersal of darkness and the lifting of gloom by the birth of Jesus who is forever our Light and Joy. And yet, the reality of darkness and gloom persists for some. And we do have to be concerned because those some are a precious part of us.

Every Christmas is celebrated in an "Anno Domini," a "Year of Our Lord." How can the Lord's year, any year, be a year of gloom? Jesus is Lord but never a Lord of gloom! Quite the opposite. Under His Lordship, gloom is destroyed forever and a joyous peace is available to all who believe in Christ. Perhaps the gloom, undeniably present in some human hearts in different circumstances, places, and periods of history, is a measure of our distance, as a people, from Christ. To be a dweller in the land of gloom is to refuse somehow submission to His loving Lordship. That submission, as we all strive to meet the demands of discipleship, is never easy. On any Christmas you can look around and see suffering and death, disease and decay, violence and fear, hatred and injury. But you also see around you goodness and love, generosity and trust, service and life, hope and faith. You see covenants kept and fidelity in all its forms at work to keep the human community moving forward. To the extent that this is explainable, the explanation lies in the power of Christmas. Power in any circumstance is the ability to cause or prevent change. God's power has changed us. The whole human race once walked in darkness; now we have access to the Light. But we humans also have power and each one of us is powerful enough to resist the change from darkness to light, preferring to nurse our grudges, refusing to forgive, or wallowing in self-pity. When a human person is powerful with a power that is not of God, he or she condemns himself or herself to walk in the darkness. But when empowered by faith and divine love, then the human person can disperse the darkness and lift the gloom.

Christmas lights on trees and roofs, and in the windows of our homes, communicate warmth and welcome to the beholder. But the Christmas light in the features of your face, in the face of the believer, says so much more. It repeats the message of St. Paul to Titus: "For the grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age..." The offer is irrevocable, the offer of light, the offer of salvation that Christmas brings. Now that the grace of God has appeared in Jesus, we need not walk in darkness; we never have to dwell in the land of gloom. For us, the darkness has ended; the land of gloom has been left behind. This the power of Christmas!