

A Pastoral Message from Fr. Gordon 2020

*"Word of life, most pure and strong,
word for which the nations long,
spread abroad, until from night
all the world awakes to light."
— from Hymnal #530*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our Education for Ministry (EFM) class recently finished reading a remarkable book connecting religious faith to daily life, entitled *Life in Christ: Practicing Christian Spirituality* (Church Publishing, 2018) by Julia Gatta. In it the author seeks (successfully I think) to answer the recurring question most serious Christians have asked themselves—what can I do to get closer to God? In addition to addressing generally our deep human need for such a communion (what she describes in her introduction as the “heart’s longing”), she suggests several practical approaches as well—ranging from the time-consecrating discipline of the Daily Office to the frequent use of contemplative silence, as exemplified by Centering Prayer.

She also recommends (as I was ashamed to be reminded!) a regular period of physical withdrawal from our vocational, workaday lives—a “retreat” (either led by another or self-directed, on our own or as part of a group) in which we are better able to devote our time to prayer and scriptural reflection and so more thoroughly concentrate our attention solely on God. Rather than distracting us from our commitment to lives of service in the world, such departures contribute to the fulfilling of our mission by renewing our strength, by ‘recharging’ our spiritual ‘batteries’ for a continuing life in ministry. Indeed, the model for such retreats is the prayer life of Jesus himself, who in the gospels can be found on several occasions either alone in prayer or having invited his disciples to “come away” to a “deserted place” and join him.

Most fascinating to me, however, was Gatta’s careful examination of the Church’s liturgical seasons, especially as these highlight the varying aspects of our relationship with God in Christ. Each period has, she relates, its own particular character—from expectant joy (as in Advent) to humble repentance (as in Lent), from “Christ is born” to “Christ is risen” and all the other hallowed moments in between. I know how compelling (and reassuring) noting the seasons of the Church has always been for me, appearing in my imagination as though they were old familiar friends once more prepared to inspire and renew the seasons of my life. It has helped, of course, that I’ve lived in a climate that

offers four distinct seasons, each period characterized by relationship to the sun's passage—from the Winter Solstice to the Spring Equinox, from darkens to light, seedtime to harvest, fruitfulness to dormancy. These aptly correspond, as Gatta suggests, to the seasons of the soul.

In this same vein, about the season after The Epiphany—a time ushered in this past Twelfth Night! — she writes:

“Having passed the winter solstice, the days gradually grow longer in the months of January and February. The Epiphany season builds on the impression of ‘light coming into the world’ as the Sunday gospels proclaim the calling of the apostles, the early teaching and healing ministry of Jesus, or the Sermon on the Mount. The manifestation of Jesus presses forward; the kingdom of God is breaking in. That light now must penetrate and illumine our minds, hearts, and actions. A seasonal blessing sums up the grace of Epiphany: ‘May Christ, the Son of God, be manifest in you, that your lives may be a light to the world’” (Gatta, p. 115).

So rather than a period inserted merely as liturgical ‘filler’ between Christmas and Lent, the time after the feast of Epiphany comprises a season all its own—one heralding ‘light coming into the world,’ while manifesting the kingdom of God ‘breaking in.’ Indeed, Epiphany is what I’ve always enjoyed calling it—the Season of Light! Here the sun’s warmth slowly grows stronger, and the days gradually lengthen; light becomes brighter and the landscape of our life’s purpose appears clearer. We are renewed by the faith that our works of light are illuminating the dark places around us, and that we are imitating our Lord’s own works of restorative ministry as proclaimed by the Gospel.

In the weeks ahead, we will hear manifested in our Sunday readings the many ways that God’s light has shown forth on earth through the teaching and healing ministry of God’s anointed Son. We will also hear, and be challenged to embrace, the call of Christ to each of us to do the works of light amid a dark and disturbing world. Perhaps nowhere is this call more direct than in the Sermon on the Mount, in which our Lord famously tells us not only what we are to do but who we are—what in our very natures defines our lives of discipleship: “You are the light of the world [he says]. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. . . . In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

Dear friends, I invite you to join with me in celebrating—by prayer and action, in body and spirit—this luminous Epiphany season, this marvelous Season of Light! Harken to our Sunday Lessons and Psalms, explore the scripture readings recommended for the Daily Office, dedicate as you are able a period of time each day for personal prayer and

reflection, and plan, as it is feasible for you, a spiritual retreat. (I'll be pleased to assist you with any of these efforts, even as you remind me of my own need to fulfill them!!).

Then—and at the same time—“let your light shine before others.” Give power to your prayers and feet to your faith, by taking what you've read and learned and contemplated out into the world—even if this means providing help and hope to just a small family of God's children (or only one person), whether nearby or across the globe. Included in future Sunday bulletins will be a descriptive list of some of the agencies and ministries that our parish outreach has supported, along with ways for you to take part either monetarily or physically (or both). And be sure to invite others in the parish or among your neighbors and friends to join you in these works of light. Few things in life give us as much joy as in sharing the joys of devoted service with another!

And while you're at it—although this may seem but a small gesture—pull out a few of those Christmas decorations you've stored away for next year, especially illuminating ones such as candles. Keep these reminders 'glowing' around your home throughout the winter days and nights. Let them serve as tangible symbols of Christ's life around us and in us, of that ever-growing, ever-maturing, Epiphany Light that shines in our hearts and offers light and love to all whom we meet.

Many blessings and a very joyous Epiphany!
Fr. Gordon +