

In Nomine Jesu

Robert W. Bertram

[Christmas Eve sermon, undated]

Once upon a time. a time like tonight - in fact, it was tonight - there was a great visit. Or maybe I should begin another way: Behold, the kingdom of heaven is like a great visit. Either way, there was a great visit, and it happened tonight.

I.

Who was it who came visiting? It was the Bright Visitor. The Bright Visitor came visiting. And how bright he was! Terribly bright! Light of Light! He was so bright that the stars and even the sun got their light from him. All the lights in all the houses and all the lights in all the stores got their electricity from him. If ever he had wanted to, he could have turned off all the light in the world. And nobody can imagine how dark that would be.

He was so bright that everything that was warm got its warmth from him. All the fireplaces and the furnaces and the stoves, the engines in the cars, the fires inside the earth and on the sun, all the warm-blooded animals got their heat from him. And if ever he had wanted to, he could have burned up everything with a thermonuclear fever. Or he could have turned off the heat of the universe altogether. And nobody can imagine how cold that would be.

He was so bright that everything that had life grew off of his light: the chlorophyl for the green plants, the sun-tanned youngsters, every living thing. "In him was life." If ever he had needed to, he could have shut off his light. But then no living thing-- not even the slimy grass under the stones or the maggots in the carcasses or the mildew or the spiders or the rot -- could survive. Nobody can imagine how dead things would suddenly be.

II.

But neither could anyone imagine how bright the Bright Visitor was. That is why he had to come visiting. Whom did he come to visit? The Dark-Hearted People. He came to light up the Dark-Hearted People-- once upon a time. Tonight, to be exact.

So dark-hearted were the Dark-Hearted People that they could not see the Bright Visitor, even when he stood squarely in front of them - in their church, in their Christmas Eve service. Why couldn't they see him? Not because he blinded them with his terrible brightness. He could have, but he did not. Then why couldn't they see him? Because they could not see anyone but themselves.

The Bright Visitor knew that. That is why, already long before his visit tonight, already 2000 years ago in a dark place called Bethlehem, he had covered up his terrible brightness by becoming a baby -- by becoming one of them, one of those people who

otherwise could not see him. "...Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man..." Now maybe the Dark-Hearted People could stand to look at him, now that he looked like them. But still they could not. So in the meantime he has put on still more covering, covering that they could feel absolutely at home with. For instance, tonight he has put on me, the preacher. And he has dressed himself up in plain old fathers and mothers and children, sitting next to one another in the pews. He hoped they would see his brightness at least through one another. But they were as dark-hearted as ever. All they could see was themselves. They could not see the Bright Visitor for the Dark-Hearted People.

III.

So then what did the Bright Visitor do? He spoke to them -- out loud, with words. Since you cannot see me, he said, then at least you must hear me. You will have to see me with your ears. They heard, all right, but they did not hear him. All they heard was preacher Bertram and the other people in the pews. All they heard me themselves. Why couldn't they hear the Bright Visitor? It was not because of the way he spoke. He spoke English, and he spoke slowly enough. No, it was because of what he said. What he said to them - as he called to them through the preacher, through the hymn-singing, through the creed - was this:

I love you. I have light for you, more
than enough light to dry up your death
and decay, to warm away your coldness,
to shine away your darkness. Take it.
You don't even have to see it. Just
take it on my Word. Take it by
listening and believing.
All I ask in return is
that you give me your darkness. I have
a way of getting rid of that - The Way
of the cross. Can you hear me? I am
the Bright Visitor. I love you.

And so on, over and over he called to them. He even called to them across the Bread and Wine, ordinary food and drink which they could understand if they could understand anything: "This is my body, my blood, for you. The body and blood you are trying to get along with now, your own body and blood, is running out of life and is growing cold. It won't last. So in the meantime take my body and blood. You can live off of that. It will last. - The Dark-Hearted People heard the words, all right. How could they help it? But what they did not hear, though the words, was the Bright Visitor.

IV.

They could not hear him because they could not believe him. So all they had were the words and no Bright Visitor. It seemed silly to them to try to see with one's ears. So all

they had life was what they could see with their eyes; other Dark-Hearted People, who only made things darker than ever for one another.

And yet their lives did not seem so dark to them once their eyes got used to the dark and they stopped expecting anything better. All they expected really was that, if Dark-Hearted People want light, then they will have to make it themselves. And so they warmed themselves off of one another. The businessman warmed himself off of his customers, the rich people warmed themselves off of the poor, the actors on TV warmed themselves off of their viewers and the viewers warmed themselves off of the actors, parents warmed themselves off of their children. If anyone wants to shine, they said, he will have to shine for himself. And so they tried to shine in their schoolwork or their housework or their church-work. And they looked for bright things to say, especially in church in their sermons and their songs. Actually, though, they did not expect to be brightened. And so, expecting no Bright Visitor, they got none. The words merely left them cold, cold as death. And the Bread and the Wine which they took without expecting to be turned on by it, simply spoiled inside of them and spoiled them with it. And some of them, as they themselves said in so many words, felt like hell. And while that was probably not a proper thing for them to say, it might just have been true - truer than they knew.

It was not that the Bright Visitor had not visited them. Maybe it would have been better for them if he had not. For they loved darkness rather than light. And he saw to it, finally, that they got their way. No one can describe how dark, how cold, how dead that can be.

V.

I wish I could tell you that this story is not true. I am not authorized to tell you that, because I did not make up the story. But I am authorized to do something better than that. I am here to tell you how to undo the story, how to change it from true to untrue, from sad to happy, as though the sad story had never happened at all. So from here on it will be a new story. And it will not be a story which I tell. It will be a story which you are. You will be the story.

"Give ear to our prayer, O Lord, and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation." This is the prayer we prayed here in church last week. This prayer was made to be prayed only by Dark-Hearted People. For only they would need to have the darkness of their hearts lightened. If you do not belong to the Dark-Hearted People, then you don't need this prayer, and it is not for you.

It is to the Dark-Hearted People that the Bright Visitor, the Light of Light, comes visiting. And if you belong to them, he comes to visit you. If you cannot see him, that is only to be expected in view of your condition. If all you can do is hear him, then don't worry about that. Be glad, for that is already quite a lot, to be able to hear him -- to be able to hear him. That is already the new story. For that is how faith comes, "by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."

And if you find, because you are used to the dark, that you can see him better in the dark, don't let that scare you. He arranged it that way. He let himself be turned off, did the Bright Visitor, all the way into the dark and the cold and the death, where you and I are. If all you can do is hear him in the dark of the stable and the cold of the manger, that will do well enough for now. If it is only in the crying of this little baby that you can hear him say, I am the Bright Visitor. I love you, then man, you are The Way. For that is exactly how his Light comes, as Word made flesh.

And if he is getting to you through these fleshly Dark-Hearted People, then he can live with Dark-Hearted People like you, too. And if he can live with you, you can live with them as he does - not just to warm yourself off of them but to warm them back, to warm them with the Bright Visitor. And you can see in them what he does, not just Dark-Hearted People but children of Light. Don't look at them now, that would be staring. But afterwhile when they come down from Communion, take a good look at them. See for yourself: don't they look like they've been visited? And if you can see that, then you've been listening. And you have heard. And you've been visited. You don't have to wait for your prayer to be answered, "brighten the darkness of our hearts." That prayer is being answered right now, by the Bright Visitor whose Word you are now hearing.

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