

## 2. Christmas Lights: “And the Light Shines in the Darkness,” Nov. 20-22

The beginnings of it already appeared on the day after Hallowe'en, but right after Remembrance Day the Christmas shopping season started more or less officially, and stores, large and small alike, are now lavishly festooned with the season's decorations, including many an ornately decorated and beautifully lit Christmas tree, which, sad to say, is nowadays commonly designated as a “holiday tree”: in the public spaces even of small town and rural Nova Scotia, well-intentioned but vacuous political correctness too often dispenses with the meaningful traditional nomenclature.

I will not be tediously predictable and decry the commercialization of Christmas (or for that matter, political correctness), as many others have done before me and will do it again over the coming weeks. Actually, there are aspects of Christmas, even apart from its distinctly Christian meaning and expressions, which never fail to delight me profoundly year after year, and these go back to my childhood in the Netherlands. For me Christmas is, above all, a festival of light and lights. Here it links up with other cultures and religious traditions; Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, comes to mind, as well as the mid-December Swedish Saint Lucia's festival of lights, which, I am sure, is rooted in pre-Christian times. In my memories of Christmas in Holland the specially lit lights of that season stand out. I am speaking here of Holland in the 1950's when the unprecedented postwar prosperity which was to materialize in the following decade was scarcely felt as yet. The illumination was almost always modest, especially in the homes: most often a few candles or electric lights in the window sill, less often a small indoor Christmas tree usually—for obvious reasons of safety—lit by electric lights. The sheer awe I was to feel in Christmas season later in Canada at the not infrequently truly spectacular outdoor illuminations in both private and public spaces would come later. Since most of the Dutch are, even now, conspicuously house-proud and are not shy about not drawing the curtains of their living rooms after darkness, an evening walk of mine along a December-darkened street would be brightened by a succession of these indoor Christmas lights, and their tranquil luminosity would awaken in me a sense of homey security—after all, I would be going home in all probability—mingled with a quiet wonder that things could be thus.

It is not surprising that light is a most powerful theme and symbol in religion and culture, for as we perceive its unique physical properties with our senses, we are moved to invest it with the highest states and qualities of being such as understanding, salvation, certainty, assurance, joy, and peace. Thus, when I read at the beginning of the Book of Genesis that the calling into being of light is the first of God's creative acts, I recognize the light as something more than its physicality but also as something glimmering with the ultimacy and transcendence of God Himself—and these are not an ultimacy and transcendence of remoteness but rather envelop and embrace all of humanity; after all, as Saint Paul preached to the Athenians (as recorded in chapter seventeen of the Acts of the Apostles), “In Him we live, move, and exist.”

Light is a central theme in the Kabbalah, the well-known collection of Jewish mystical writings. In one text (I quote from *The Essential Kabbalah*, edited and

translated by Daniel C. Watt, p. 90), Rabbi Judah argues that the light given by God to the righteous is not completely hidden away: "If the light were completely hidden away, / the world would not exist for even a moment! / Rather it is hidden and sown like a seed / that gives birth to seeds and fruit. / Thereby the world is sustained." Surah 24 in the Qur'an points to the symbolism of the light given off by a lamp in a niche (I quote from the Al-Qur'an in the contemporary translation by Ahmed Ali): "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. / The semblance of His light is that of a niche / in which is a lamp, the flame within a glass, / the glass a glittering star as it were..."

Light symbolism pervades Canto 34, the final Canto, of part III, *Paradise*, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the poet and narrator, who is Dante himself, invokes God as the supreme light: "O supreme Light, who raisest thyself / over mortal imagining, lend to my mind / a little of as thou didst then appear." The imagery of light continues, and reaches a crescendo in the following lines: "Within its depths I beheld / bound by love in one volume / what is scattered throughout the universe: / substances and accidents and their modes / as if fused together in such a wise / that I affirm it is a light undivided."

At the beginning of book three of his *Paradise Lost*, John Milton invokes "holy Light," which he first hails as "the offspring of Heaven's first-born," that is, the offspring of God the Son: "Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born." Then he reflects on and invokes Light as of being of the essence of God (the Father) Himself: "Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam / May I express thee unblamed? Since God is Light, / and never but in unapproached Light / Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee, / Bright effluence of bright essence increate." Later in his invocation, the poet strikes a deeply personal note: he is blind and thus has no longer the faculty of physical sight; however, he asks God in faith for the heavenly Light that will bring him inner vision and therefore understanding: "So much the rather thou Celestial Light / Shine Inward, and the mind through all her powers / Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence / Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight."

The quality of light presents itself in an unforgettable way for me in Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *Der Triumpfbogen* ("Arch of Triumph") published in 1945, with great critical and commercial success also in the English-speaking world. (Remarque is especially remembered today as the author of what is still considered as one of the most powerful novels of the First World War, *Nicht Neues im Westen*, translated as *All Quiet on the Western Front*.) The story of *Arch of Triumph* is a sombre one pervaded by a pessimistic humanist ethos characteristic of much of the literature of the last century. Dr Ravic, the protagonist, is an illegal immigrant living in Paris as the Second World War approaches. He is a refugee from Nazi Germany, which has taken away his passport and citizenship so that he is now stateless. He is a skilled surgeon, supporting himself by filling in (illegally, of course) for less skilled French surgeons. He has a romance with an actress, Joan Madou, and in the summer of 1939 just before the outbreak of WWII they enjoy a vacation on the Mediterranean coast. The impact, both sensory and spiritual, on Ravic of the radiant sunlight streaming across sea and sky is described as follows:

*The light. Ever anew it was the light. It came flying from the horizon like white foam between the deep blue of the sea and the lighter blue of the sky; it came flying breathless and deepest breath at the same time, radiance and reflection in one simple primordial happiness of being so bright, so gleaming, of such weightless floating.*

These words played through my mind less than a week after the burial of Scott's ashes in Amherst after I had driven with Vernon and Tammy to Baxter's Harbour on the Bay of Fundy, looking on a warm brilliant August day across the waters to Cape Split and Cape d' Or, and they were words of great consolation for me. I experienced exactly the same ten days or so later at Berry Point at the northern tip of Gabriola Island where I had driven with my brother Gerrit; standing there and looking, in the still radiant sunshine of early evening, across the waters of the Strait of Georgia to the Coastal Mountains straight ahead far in the distance and to the mountains of Vancouver Island far on the left; it was, once more, above all a feeling of profound peace.

At no place in the Bible does the symbolism of light figure more prominently than in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, where it invests the Logos, the Word, which is God and is incarnate in Jesus the Christ: In Him [the Logos] was life, and the life was the light of humanity [to phōs tōn anthrōpōn], and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overwhelmed it... This man [John the Baptist] came for a witness, in order to bear witness about the light so that everyone might believe through him. He was not the light but was meant to bear witness about the light... It was the true light which illuminates every person coming into the world. (1. 4-5, 7-8, 9).

November's short days are moving towards the even shorter days of December. A few homes in my neighbourhood have already their Christmas lights up. Within a couple of weeks, there will be many more. As I will be walking then in the early evening darkness, I cannot help but compare the bold exuberance of some of this illumination to the quiet, homey Christmas lights I recall from my childhood years in Zwolle, but both partake of the same enduring supremely meaningful symbolism.

**Note:** All translations are mine except where otherwise indicated. Except for a few verbal alterations, I have basically followed the King James Version in, "It was the true light which illuminates every person coming into the world." Most modern translations take "coming" with "was." and thus translate as (something like), "The true light which illuminates every person was coming into the world." This might be preferable from a certain theological point of view but is patently very awkward, even ungrammatical since the Greek present participle *erchomenon* ("coming") right after the noun *anthrōpon* clearly modifies the latter, and any person listening to this sentence (in the early Christian churches the act of listening to the gospel far predominated over reading it) would immediately connect it with the preceding *anthrōpon* rather than link it far back to *ēn* ("was") at the beginning of the sentence. The only way, I think, the now preferred translation "was coming" can be justified is to place a distinct stop after *anthrōpon* in one's reading (whether aloud or silently) of this sentence.