

Refiner and Purifier

While we in the West keep Christmas, the whole of the Eastern Church celebrate the Epiphany. Epiphany is a kind of umbrella for them, embracing the feasts of the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, the Baptism of the Lord, the Marriage Feast of Cana and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. For this reason, the Christmas-Epiphany season does not end until today, the Feast of the Presentation or Candlemas, and this is why we keep the crib scene up until today.

Today's feast also links the events surrounding Jesus' birth to his passion, death and resurrection. The Epiphany reveals him as the Light of the Nations and Simeon uses this same title to describe Jesus when he sees the child in the Temple, but the old man also speaks ominously about a sword of sorrow piercing Mary's heart on account of her child. In this way today's feast not only looks back to Epiphany and Christmas but also looks forward to the passion and crucifixion of Jesus and Mary's sorrow at the foot of the cross. It is a kind of link that not only looks forward to Jesus' death but beyond to the rekindling of his life in the resurrection and the restoring of him as the Light of the World in his rising from the dead, something we celebrate symbolically in the lighting of the paschal candle at Easter.

Jesus' rising from the dead also rekindles the light of hope in our lives because it means that he has defeated death not just for himself, but for all of us who belong to him through baptism. He has died under the power of our sins and because he has defeated death, he has also defeated the power of our sins to hold us in death. He has brought us to new and everlasting life in him. This is why he is the light of our lives, indeed, the light of the whole world.

As Jesus' disciples, we have been made the bearers of the light of Christ to the world. For us to carry that light into the world through our lives requires that we stay close to the source of light through lives constantly shaped, refined and purified to conform with his; but though this may be a constant struggle against sin and temptation we must never lose sight of the fact that in Christ Jesus we have one who understands our strengths and weaknesses and knows well how to help us in our need; as the reading from Hebrews reminds us today, 'because he has himself been through temptation he is able to help others who are tempted'. By his grace, then, may he keep the flame of faith alive in our hearts so that we may bring the radiance of his light into the world today, a light that not even the darkness of sin can overpower, and may his kingdom come.