

January 22, 2017 Darkness and Light Homily: Brothers and sisters, in 1939, the newly elected Pontiff, Pope Pius XII issued his first encyclical, a prophetic letter of great import. So controversial was the document that the German government refused permission for the Catholic Bishops to distribute it in their churches. The encyclical was penned by the Pope after the German invasion of Poland. Surely, it was a dark chapter in the history of the world. For the Jews of Europe, their world had become "a land of gloom." A short time later, the world would be at war. In the English speaking world, the Pope's letter came to be known as "*Darkness over the Earth*".

In the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry on a sour note. John the Baptist has been arrested, and will soon be delivered up to death. Jesus has left his Nazareth home and will never return to the place of his upbringing. So, we are told by the Evangelist, He finally settles in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, two territories that hold painful memories for the Jewish people. Seven centuries before the birth of Christ, the Assyrians invaded the territories, and overwhelmed the army of the Jews. A portion of the Jewish population was deported and a sizable number of foreigners were planted in the region to colonize it. Matthew, undoubtedly inspired by God, sees Jesus coming to Galilee as the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecy: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone". (Is.8:24) The land, once devastated and abused in the time of the prophet, will be the first to receive the light of Christ's light and preaching. The prophet announces that a glorious era is going to follow a shameful time. In Christ Jesus, a great light has dawned to dispel the darkness of oppression and death. At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus is resolved to wage war against the power of darkness. We recall the Word of the Lord in John's first chapter: "All that came to be were alive with his life and that light was the light of men... the light shines in the dark, and the darkness has not mastered it". (Jn.1:3-4)

Father James Turro, a biblical scholar of great stature and one of my former teachers in the seminary, calls to mind one of the most recognizable figures of a bygone era, the lamplighter. He helps us appreciate the Light that has come into the world. Few things in olden times could have been as fascinating as the lamplighter making his rounds. Every evening as daylight began to fade, the lamplighter would make his way down the high street of the village and wherever he stopped, he left behind a warm and cheery light... a light that would guide and reassure everyone who came after him! Father Turro is of the view that one would be hard put to think of a better way of describing Jesus' mission on earth. He writes, "For Jesus did just that in his life, in his death, and, above all, in his resurrection, he kindled a great light, a light of hope, which continues to encourage us as we make our way through life".

The late Pope John Paul often referred to the "Culture of Death" in the Western world. Abortion, euthanasia, addiction, physician assisted suicide and death dealing poverty remind us of a darkness bedeviling the once-Christian West. But the Pope reminds Christians that a light... the light of God's Word, shines in the darkness, and will never be extinguished.

"Anguish has taken wing, dispelled in darkness: for there is no gloom where but now there was distress" (Is.8:23).

Amen!