

Isaiah uses the metaphor of light as he describes the return of the remnant of Israel to its native land after exile. It symbolizes the presence, power and love of God and represents the dawn of new hope after the darkness of enslavement. Isaiah's is one of the earlier prophecies in Scripture that speaks of God's plan to extend the offer of salvation to everyone, everywhere. Since Matthew's gospel, as a whole, focuses on explaining how prophecy is being fulfilled in Jesus, it's no surprise that he has Jesus quoting this particular passage.

Nowadays, we encounter the light of God's presence, power and love most conspicuously in the Eucharist. As it turns out though, there's still a fair amount of darkness that needs to be dispelled about that. You might've read recently that fewer than 30% of Catholics believe that the Eucharist is the Real Presence; that it's really and truly the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Our church goes through this kind of thing from time to time and great minds like St. Thomas Aquinas have stepped up to the task of helping people see the light. I'm no Thomas Aquinas, so let me just tell you a little story that expresses what he wrote in ordinary language. Hopefully it'll shed some light on the subject for you.

My friend Ernie told me about the time he was chatting with his daughter Alice and his son Tommy about those reports I just mentioned to you.

"I know the words about what we're supposed to believe," Alice said, "but I'm uncomfortable because I don't understand what they mean. I try to explain, but I can't even convince myself."

Tommy agreed. "Can you tell us something that will help make it click, Dad?" he asked.

Ernie thought for a moment and then said. "I might be able to help you and your friends with that a bit. Let me get something from my office first."

Ernie went upstairs to his office and came back with a FedEx mailer. Before he sat down again, he gave each of his children a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

"Don't get mushy with us, Dad," Tommy growled. "We just need a simple explanation."

"That was part of the explanation, Tommy," Ernie said. "You'll see. Real Presence is much more about love and relationship than categories and facts. Let me show you something first. Look at this envelope."

The two teenagers looked at it as Ernie handed them the FedEx mailer, “See the arrow?” Alice and Tommy stared at the envelope, puzzled. You can share that experience too, if you wish – there are some pictures from Wikipedia of a FedEx cargo jet in the pews for you.

“What are you talking about, Dad,” Alice asked, “There’s no arrow - it just says ‘FedEx’.”

Ernie grinned and waited for the light to go on.

“Oh, wait,” Tommy said a moment later. “There it is, between the ‘e’ and the ‘x’!”

The instant he said that, his sister exclaimed, as some of you might be doing right now too,

“Oh, look, there it is!”

“Every time you look at that logo from here on in,” Ernie said, “you’ll always see the arrow.

Like the truth of the Real Presence, sometimes the reality of something that’s right in front of you has to be pointed out by someone who already gets it. After that, it’s yours forever.”

“OK, Dad,” Alice said, “that’s nice, but tell us more. Our friends ask us how we know Jesus is present, when it starts, when it ends...what do we tell them?”

“Good questions, Alice,” Ernie said. “Let’s start simply. The bread and wine become the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ exactly when the priest finishes saying the words of consecration over them. We know that’s true because the priest is doing what Jesus told his apostles and their successors to do, the way he told them to do it. Jesus himself is the authority. If your friends have trouble believing that Jesus has both a human and divine nature, that authority might not be evident to them. It’s up to you to enlighten them about that.”

“What we see doesn’t change visibly,” Ernie continued, “but God changes what it really is into the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. Since everything owes its very being to God, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that God can do that. Nor should it come as a surprise that this deepest identity isn’t externally visible. If you consider the innermost reality of me, you or anyone else, I think you’ll agree that who we all really are is incredibly deep, very complex and utterly hidden. In a way, our visible bodies are only signs of who we really are.”

“That makes sense, Dad,” Tommy said, “but is there anything in everyday life that changes like that? It would sure make it easier to explain to our friends.”

“Well,” Ernie said. “You can explain that it’s a little like the way it was for Deacon Jeff when he became an American. He recited the Pledge of Allegiance exactly as it was written out for him, in front of a judge who had the authority to administer it. Poof – he changed into an American. He looked the same as he did the moment before, but something about who he really was had changed dramatically and his destiny afterwards was completely different than what it had been just the moment before.”

“I get it, Dad,” Alice said. “It’s similar. Not exactly the same, but I think our friends will see it.”

“I have another question, Dad,” Tommy said. “I understand the consecration part, but how long does the Real Presence last? A few minutes? Overnight?”

“St. Thomas Aquinas explained that pretty well, too,” Ernie replied. “As long as the bread and wine still look like bread and wine, they continue to signify sacramentally the reality which they express. In a way, the bread and wine are similar to the hug and kiss you received from me just a few minutes ago. They’re significant ways in which I visibly convey the non-physical reality of my love to you. I think you’ll agree that there’s lots more to love than grips and lips, but hugs are still pretty wonderful, aren’t they?

His children nodded with understanding, and Alice said, “Can’t ever get enough hugs, Dad!”

“Yep,” Ernie agreed, “Signs like hugs are so important, but they don’t last, do they? Our arms and lips quickly go back to being just plain body parts. Likewise, the bread and wine stop signifying the Real Presence you received when digestion begins and they don’t look like bread and wine anymore.”

“But the love of Jesus Christ for us that we receive in the Eucharist is for keeps. It comes with the pledge of never-ending accompaniment, communion with every other person in the Church, and the promise of everlasting life,” Ernie concluded. “No hug from anyone can ever convey love like that to you. If you and your friends can get that, you’ve seen the arrow; you’ve seen the light.”