

12th March 2023, 3rd Sunday of Lent, 'Let your light shine' – John 8:12-20 'Light'

Light is an extraordinary thing. Gaze out at a sunset over the sea, as the waves glint and a thousand shards pierce your retina. Watch the first rays of sun penetrate the clouds on foggy mornings, as a million particles of moisture are briefly illuminated before evaporating and giving way to clear air. Stand in silence before a painting by Vermeer or Turner or Constable (the masters of light) and reflect on life's deep mysteries. Hide in a cupboard with members of your family and shine a torch underneath your chin, telling scary stories.

Light is fascinating, uplifting, unquenchable. Light gives us warmth and sight. Light lies at the heart of what it means to be alive.

Light is one of the universal religious metaphors in our world. The Jews have Hanukkah, or festival of lights; Muslims have Eid; Hindus and Sikhs have Diwali. Buddhists talk about the path to enlightenment. Light is one of the few images to have almost universally positive connotations.

So what is so special about Jesus' teaching on light? Basically it comes down to this: light figures in lots of religious teaching, in all kinds of religions. You'll find holy books, gurus or prophets saying 'this is the light...' or 'this is the light'. Even biblical prophets pointed to the light. **Only Jesus says I am the light.** Take a moment to digest that: if there's one thing to take away today, it's this. Jesus doesn't say *this is* the light: Jesus says '*I am* the light.' And not just for one group of people, or even for all of his followers, but for the whole world. *I am the light of the world.*

But what does it mean for Jesus to say I am the light? How would people have interpreted it then? And what mean for us today? Let's start by recognising that 'light' is uniquely important to St John. The word appears 21 times in the 21 chapters of his gospel, and apart from one reference to John the Baptist as light, the other 20 references are all about Jesus, or spoken by Jesus: in chs 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11 and 12.

In the end, the simple answer to that big question is that **when Jesus says 'I am the light' what he means is: I am God / I am divine.** John's gospel has 7 'I am' statements, and 'I am' is a rendering of the Jews' special name for God – Yahweh (YHWH). So, in this case, light is one of the key defining characteristics of God himself – here on earth, in human form, as Jesus.

Light has always been associated with God. Many ancient cultures worshipped the sun and moon – and that means to St. John's pagan readers in that culture, what Jesus is doing here is clearly pointing them away from other sources of light to the divine light, the Lord of the universe. But it's also connected with God throughout the bible, too. The first thing God says in the bible is: 'Let there be... *light.*' Then God appears to Moses as light – we tend to think of that only in terms of a fire, but think about what the only sources of light available to humans were when the nights drew in? Hence God walks with Israel in the desert as a pillar of fire by night. Or think about Psalm 27: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation.'

So, when Jesus says what he says here, he is picking up all of those references which connected light with God and saying: ‘all of that – it’s me!’ I am the divine light, come to be with you now, to all who will confess my name. No wonder the religious leaders didn’t like it! No wonder they wanted other witnesses: who *is* this troublesome rabbi, making such outrageous claims? PAUSE

If Jesus is the light, what does that mean for us?

The first thing is in the text directly, in what Jesus says: **‘I am the source of life’** – (v12) ‘Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ Just as the sun’s light creates life in plants through photosynthesis, so this Son’s light gives life to all who follow him. There’s not been much sun around this week, but in the next few weeks we’ll enjoy the sun opening up the flowers: that’s a brilliant image of what Jesus’ light does for us – allows us to bloom, to flourish. Let the light of the Son cause you to flourish, as you open yourself to his light.

Second, it also means **‘I am the source of truth’**. There has always been a connection between light and truth. Psalm 119: ‘your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ And in talking about not walking in darkness any more, I reckon Jesus maybe had Psalm 119 in the back of his mind. Jesus comes to bring us, not just life, but truth. Is there something in your life where you need Jesus’ light for your path? Let the light of the Son lead you into truth, the truth which sets you free.

Finally, it means **‘I am the source of goodness’** – darkness is not just a metaphor for ignorance, but also for evil or wrong. Light attracts moths and repels cockroaches. And this is where it gets more personal, and also more relational. Because Jesus doesn’t just say ‘I am the light of the world,’ he also says ‘*you* are the light of the world.’ But we always need to hear these two things together, because when Jesus invites us be lights too, he says ‘*let* your light shine’ – not make it shine, but let it shine. That’s because it’s not our light – it’s Jesus’ light! As followers with the light of life within us, it is *Jesus’* light which shines out of us. So, the more we grow in our relationship with Jesus, the more his light floods into our lives, the more it shines out of us to the world.

The religious leaders hated this light. Not because they lacked zeal for God – what’s so sad is that I think they genuinely thought they were safeguarding their heritage – but because their love of power and status blinded them to the true, humble, kind, self-giving light of God, the God who invites all of us, however much or little we have, whatever our status, simply to shine for him.

Jesus’ invitation to all of us is very simple: will you receive the light? This light will keep shining anyway – but will you receive it? Will you allow it to bring you life, to lead you into truth, and to shine into every part of your being, that your being will radiate that light to others?

May the Lord grant us all grace to look to the light, the true light – to Jesus Christ. ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will *never* walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ Amen.