

14th April 2024 – John 8:12-18 (Is 49:5-9) ‘I am the light of the world’

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 pierce through 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 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; 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. 1.5 million people each year even take about 12 million trips to Blackpool for its illuminations, and other attractions, making it the second most popular single European tourist destination after St Peter’s in Rome. Strange but true.

So what is it about the Christian understanding of light that makes it so distinctive? What have we got to say about it that sheds any unique, well, I have to use the word, *light* on the subject? Or is the passage we had read just a Christian version of something which all religions can aspire to?

I think we first have to acknowledge that light has natural connotations with goodness and happiness, something which most people can connect with. Light also naturally leads us towards a higher power. Ancient peoples worshipped the sun and moon for that reason, because they were sources of light. As religious understanding developed, light came to symbolise something with divine connotations. And of course, our own understanding of God’s character sees **light as something uniquely attributable to God himself**. We don’t worship created objects like the sun any more, but the bible only applies 3 nouns to God which aren’t names: God is love, God is Spirit and God is *light*. Indeed the first words that God is recorded as speaking in Genesis 1 are: ‘Let there be light’. Light is fundamental to God’s character.

So, given that light is an almost universal religious idea, what is so special about Jesus’ teaching on light? It all comes down to the source: lots of religious teaching on light says: ‘this is the light’. **Only Jesus says: I am the light**. And not just for my followers, for the whole world: ‘Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’

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? Well, let’s begin by noting that the theme of light is very important to John: he mentions it 21 times across 7 chapters, all but once in reference to Jesus. And ultimately, where we have to start is that, since God is light, when Jesus says ‘I am the light,’ he is saying: I am God, I am divine. The phrase ‘I am’ is ‘ego eimi’, it’s a Greek form of the special name of God used by the Jews: Yahweh, the eternal ‘I am.’ All of these ‘I am’ statements point to Jesus’ divinity, but this one is clearer than most: if images like the shepherd and the vine need a Jewish context to understand, the image of light is obvious to everyone. As we’ve noted, ancient cultures worshipped the sources of light, and **Jesus is describing *himself* as the object of our worship**.

So, Jesus is clearly pointing to his divine identity, but let's put some flesh on that – what key attributes can we associate with the Light of the World?

First, it means: I am the **source of life**. Matter needs light to grow – the ancients didn't have the scientific proof of photosynthesis, but they knew it all the same. As chapter 1 of John 1 says: In Jesus was life, and that life was the *light* of all mankind. We don't just need sunlight, we need Son-light (s-O-n). Today's word from Jesus is an invitation to life, life in all its fullness. Where is Jesus inviting you to enter more fully into his life?

Second, Jesus is telling us that he is the **source of truth**. As the gospel of John begins, the Light is also the Word, or as Psalm 119 famously puts it: 'your word is a lamp to my feet and a...? *light* to my path.' Light and truth are connected – think of the phrase to shed light on things. Jesus' light is there to guide us, to direct our paths. So, our second invitation from Jesus for today is: is there something in your life where you need Jesus' light for your path? Why not ask him to shine his light to help you see the way ahead?

Finally, Jesus is telling us that he is the **source of goodness**. This is the more challenging aspect, one which Jesus refers to in chapter 3 of John: 'Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.' When we come into Jesus' light, it both causes us to grow, but also shines a light into the dark places, it exposes things which Jesus wants to heal or to change. So, our third invitation from Jesus for today is: is there something in your life where you need Jesus' light for your path?

As I draw things together, **Jesus invites us today to come into his light**. To experience his life, to shine his light on the paths of our life, and to expose the things which need to change or heal. So can I invite us all to come: come experience real life, abundant life. Come and find truth that sets you free. Come out of the dark, and let Jesus' light chase all the bad stuff away. You can bring your darkness into Jesus' light, and it won't be dark anymore.

I am the light of the world, Jesus says. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. By God's grace, will you accept that invitation today? Will you come into the light? And will you let that light bring you life, direction and change? Amen.