

John 8:12 – The Light of the World

(Reading – John 1:1-14)

Introduction

Have you ever been in complete darkness? In these days of street lighting and ambient light from cities and even starlight at night, it's almost impossible to be in total darkness. Ever when you shut your eyes, light filters through your eyelids.

I remember, many years ago when I was courting, I took Liz to the Blue John mines in Derbyshire. We went deep underground into a large cavern, walking on a board-walk with a hand-rail and with our way marked out by lights. When we were in the cavern, our guide asked us if we had ever been in total darkness. Then, telling us to take a firm hold on the hand-rail he switched off the lights. His voice came out of the darkness telling us to stand still and let our eyes get used to the dark. After a few minutes we were still in total darkness; however much our eyes tried to adjust they could see absolutely nothing. It was an unusual and slightly disturbing experience. What if the lights did not come on again? What if our guide sneaked away and left us in this underground cavern? Well, the lights were turned on again and we were eventually led out of the mines by our guide.

Light dispels the darkness

Imagine what it must have been like at the dawn of creation. The chaos of unformed worlds, all enveloped in absolute and total darkness. Then God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. What an immense and cosmic transformation that must have been – though there were no people there to see it. Light bathed the universe and the formless globe that would be our world. Light brought into being through the powerful and creative word of the living God. "And God saw that it was good."

Light the source of life

This light was essential to all the life that then springs into being at the creative word of God. In particular, the light of our Sun. The light of the Sun provides the warmth needed for life. The light provides energy used by plants through photosynthesis to grow and to store energy in their sap and roots and fruits and seeds. Photosynthesis really is a remarkable process which is, I believe, still not fully understood and has not yet been mimicked by science in the production of photovoltaic cells – our best efforts are not nearly so efficient as those of simple plants. Plants in turn provide food for animals and for ourselves. Without light and heat there is no life.

And of all the life that God created, human beings were given a special place. The man and the woman were made in the image of God; made to be like him and to enjoy communion with him – the source of light and life. They were made to look after God's creation and to nurture its life.

Darkness threatens the light

But in rebelling against God, humankind has turned away from the light and embraced the darkness. In rejecting God, the source of their life, they chose death. In being cast out of the Garden, out of the presence of God, God abandoned them to the darkness they had chosen for themselves.

We know the history that followed. Brother murdered brother. Violence and hatred amongst men and women grew to such a fever pitch that we read in Genesis 6,

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground – for I regret that I have made them.' (Genesis 6:5-7)

And, despite the world being washed clean in the flood of God's judgment, this remains the world we live in to this day.

On the 27th January we were remembering the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau where over 1.1 million men, women and children were killed. I have been reading the heart-rending story of Lale Sokolov, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* as retold by Heather Morris. It brings home the brutal treatment of those who had been herded into the concentration camps: the arbitrary killings and careless cruelty. How could those in charge of the camp treat other human beings in such a heartless way?

Yet this same story is repeated through human history: Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, the genocides that accompanied the division of India and Pakistan, followed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and in which many were slaughtered in Rwanda. In recent years we have seen the cruelty of ISIS and the destruction caused by both rebels and government forces in Syria and in thousands of other conflicts ancient, modern and contemporary. This is the evil that has entered the human heart that has turned its back on the call of its Creator. Humanity has turned from the light and embraced the darkness; it lies under the sway of the Prince of Darkness who has set himself against God and against all that is good. The Evil One has sown the seeds of destruction in the hearts of humankind and this is the dark harvest it has borne and is bearing.

Jesus, the Light of the Word, has stepped down into our darkness

We read the first fourteen verses of John's Gospel. John wrote it as a deliberate echo of the opening verses of the Bible – of Genesis 1 which we also read earlier.

John is probably writing for people who knew some of the stories of the things Jesus did – his healing ministry, and some of the things he taught. John is saying that it is vital to understand who Jesus is – this Jesus who walked and talked with us. He is *the Word*; he is the power of God by which the universe was created. The coming of the Word into the world floods a darkened world with light – he is the light of the world who stepped down into darkness. He brings order into the chaos and confusion of a world that is creation undone. He brings life in the place of unbelief and of death.

And just as at the beginning of creation the light overcame the darkness – dispelled the darkness – so it is with the coming of Jesus; the darkness cannot overcome or extinguish the light. Jesus declares that he is the light of the world. Jesus, the light of the world, has come.

What does this mean that Jesus is the Light of the World?

Jesus shows us the character and glory of the living God.

We live in a world of darkness, cut off from God and from the knowledge of God. The world is full of a confusion of voices regarding the character of God. Many say that there is no such being as God – he is a figment of our own imagination, created to frighten children into submission. Those who believe that there is a God – or a panoply of gods – have different and mutually contradictory views of what God is like. How can we ever know what God is like.

John tells us in his first Letter that God is light and that there is no darkness in him. Jesus *is* God, God come in the flesh. He is the Light of the world come to show us the character and glory of the living God. Paul tells us that, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Jesus shows us what God is like. He shows us something of the glory of God. He shows us something of the burning purity and holiness of God – a God in whom there is no darkness at all. Jesus shows us the holiness of God by his own sinless character. But he also shows us the glory of God's grace – that God is a God of compassion and mercy. He is not a terrible tyrant in the sky just waiting for us to put a foot wrong so that he may come down on us like a ton of bricks.

My readings this week included Luke chapter 15. Luke tells us that Jesus was surrounded by crowds, particularly the outcasts of society who loved to come and be near him and listen to him – people whom the religious leaders called "tax collectors and sinners". Nor did Jesus push such

people away; on the contrary, much to the annoyance of the Pharisees Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them.

Against this background, Jesus told three parables about the joy that comes from finding something or someone you have lost. The third of these is the well-known and much loved story of *The Prodigal Son*.

The father in this parable is a picture of God. This is what God is like, says Jesus, he welcomes the returning sinner; he not only allows him back to eat at his table, he throws a party and welcomes the prodigal home with open arms and much joy.

Jesus is telling the sulking Pharisees that in all he is doing he is showing the world the character of God the Father; he is making him known. And this still is the message of the gospel; it is not just that Jesus is like God, the wonder rather is that God is like Jesus. This really is something we find very difficult to comprehend. Jesus shows us what God is like; the one who created the universe "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The elder brother in the parable does not share his father's joy over the returning prodigal; he does not want to associate with sinners. This character surely corresponds to the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In turning up their nose at "sinners" and refusing to have anything to do with them they think that they are reflecting the character of God – but they are not. They have a wrong view of God. God may be holy, but he loves sinners and longs to embrace them and welcome them home.

The darkness seeks to extinguish the light

Jesus came to show the world something of the character of the living God – his burning holiness but also his great love for the world he had created and his longing for people to return to him and know the embrace of his forgiveness and love.

But the world into which Jesus came preferred darkness to light. Whether it was the pagan Romans who wanted to maintain their own power or whether the Jewish religious leaders who wanted not only to retain their power but also to hold on at all costs to their distorted view of God. So they conspired together to extinguish the light – they nailed him on a cross to die. And there, darkness seemed to have the last word as even the sun refused to shine.

And yet, the light will not be extinguished but busts anew from the darkness of the tomb, from the darkness of death, with blazing, inextinguishable light and indestructible, all-conquering life. His resurrection from the dead is the declaration by God that human sin cannot extinguish God's love. He has welcomed home his beloved Son who bore our sin and rebellion in his body on the cross and he will welcome with him all who turn to him and trust in him. Jesus is the one through whom life was created at the beginning and he is now the source of new life – the life of the new creation in which darkness has no place.

The darkness can never extinguish the light that has appeared in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us to follow him

In our text for this morning, John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jesus is the source of light – of the knowledge of God, and he is the source of life – the very life of God. He calls men and women to come to him. He calls us to come and find life in him – the life of the new creation. He calls us to follow him, to turn from the darkness and to walk in the light.

He calls us to lives marked by holiness – the pure holiness which is part of God's own character and which we have seen transcribed into a human life in the Lord Jesus. He calls us to follow him – to learn of him and to become like him, to be holy as he is holy, to walk in the light. The call of Jesus upon our lives is beyond our human ability to obey. We can only walk as he walked as his life is in us and his Spirit animates us; as, in the words of the apostle Paul, Christ lives in us.

Jesus calls us to be the light of the world

Not only is Jesus the Light of the world, he calls us also to be the light of the world. In what we refer to as *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says,

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16).

Jesus calls us not only to follow him, to walk in the light, but also to be light-bearers. We are to shine with the light of Christ into a darkened world. We are to reveal the very character of the living God to others by how we live. We are to live holy lives. Paul writes to the Ephesians

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness ... This is why it is said:

‘Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:8, 10-11, 14-15)

We are to live lives marked by goodness, righteousness and truth that stand out in a world at war with itself – a world of darkness that mocks the very ideas of truth, goodness and objective right and wrong.

But, like Christ, our lives are not only to be holy, they are also to be marked by sacrificial, self-giving, love for those around us who have not yet come to the light – who have not yet seen the light of the glory of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ Jesus. It is above all in this that we show the world what God is life, a God of compassion, forgiveness and mercy who longs for his rebellious children to return to him.

We are called to bear witness to Jesus, the Light of the world, by being that light. We are called to have a transforming influence on the world by being a transformed people.

- How will we shine the light of Christ, the light of God's presence and love, into the lives of others around us this week?
- How will we, as Christian people, bear witness to the light – to what is good and true and generous and loving and is of God – in the areas of conflict that mark our self-seeking world, conflicts in which lives of those made in the image of God are still being crushed and destroyed?
- What does it mean for us to be the light of the world and for that light to shine with such clarity and power that it illuminates and pushes back the darkness – so that God's kingdom comes in power?
- What does it mean for that light to give light to every person coming into the world (see John 1:9)?
- What needs to change in us for that light to shine?

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Marshfield – 2/2/2020: 10.30