

LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

John 8:12; 9:1–41

Chapters 7 and 8 of John's Gospel are set in the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. One of the features of this festival was the lighting of four huge lamps in the temple, in the court of women. As celebrations went on through the night Jerusalem would be illuminated by the light of these lamps.

It was in this context that Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). The Feast of Tabernacles was a highlight of the Jewish year but Jesus was claiming to supercede even the best of the old way. Those festival lamps in the temple lit up Jerusalem but Jesus said, 'I am the light of the *world*.' The lights in the temple would be extinguished when the Feast ended. Jesus said, 'Whoever follows me will *never* walk in darkness, but will have the light of *life*.'

The mention of light takes us right back to the beginning of creation, the very beginning of Genesis chapter 1. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light' (Genesis 1:1–3).

The crowds at the Feast of Tabernacles would remember Psalm 27 verse 1: 'The LORD is my light and my salvation — whom shall I fear?' They would recall Psalm 36 verse 9: 'With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.'

Everything around us: colour, form, health, activity – it's all dependent on light. 'In your light we see light.' When Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world' he was making no small claim.

John picked this up right at the beginning of his Gospel. He begins by describing Jesus as the Word by which everything was created. He goes on to say, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men' (John 1:4).

Many people had been impressed by the prophetic authority of John the Baptist, and his importance is acknowledged. 'There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe' (John 1:6, 7). But the Gospel goes on to say, 'He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world' (John 1:8, 9). The true light was not John the Baptist but Jesus.

When Jesus claimed to be the light of the world he was contrasting

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

John says: 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it' (John 1:5). This rejection of light is underlined in verses 9 to 11. 'The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.'

Chapter 3 verse 19 spells out the consequences. 'This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.' What this means exactly is in verse 18: 'Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.'

Jesus is the light of the world: God's light, the light of love and truth and life itself. But people loved darkness rather than light. And what is that darkness? The darkness of hate and lies and ultimately death. It's the darkness of evil and sin.

When Jesus described himself as the light of the world he was making an important point. Darkness has no inherent existence. It is simply the absence of light. When you go to bed at night you don't switch on the darkness. You switch off the light.

The darkness in the world, the darkness of evil and sin and violence and injustice, is there because the light has been rejected. Without the light of Christ we are all in darkness. Reject Jesus and all you have is darkness.

The terrible events in London on Thursday 7th July 2005 are easy to identify with darkness. What has shocked most people even more than the carnage and destruction of the bombs themselves is the fact that the bombers appear to have been very ordinary people living ordinary lives in an ordinary community. Without Jesus that darkness will always descend.

Paul uses this contrast between light and darkness to illustrate the difference between those who know Christ and those who don't.

Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17 to 20: 'So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way.'

And again, in the same letter, chapter 5, verses 8 to 14: 'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."'

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness,' but the clear implication is that whoever does not follow him *will* walk in darkness.

Jesus went on to develop this theme of darkness and light in a related illustration.

DAY AND NIGHT

John chapter 9 verses 4 and 5: 'As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

This obvious connection between darkness and light, day and night, goes back to the beginning of Genesis. Chapter 1 verses 3 to 5: 'And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.'

Jesus was saying something slightly different in John chapter 9: 'While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' There's a time factor here. 'Night is coming when no one can work.' There is a time to respond to Jesus. There is a time to work for Jesus. That time is not indefinite. There is a limit. You have no guarantee of tomorrow, only today. There's a good maxim that says: Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today. That is never more true than your decision about Jesus Christ. If you say, 'Later,' there may never be another opportunity.

Paul talks about Christ's second coming in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 4 to 9: 'But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the

darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Jesus is coming again and when he does people will find themselves in one of two categories: facing God's anger or receiving salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

'I am the light of the world.' Jesus' claim is explained in terms of darkness and light, in terms of day and night. But there is one further explanation of Christ's claim. It is to be understood in terms of

BLINDNESS AND SIGHT

John chapter 9 verses 39 to 41: 'Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.'"

What Jesus speaks about here is something even more serious than darkness. It's blindness. For the person who is blind even the light cannot lift the darkness. John returns to this theme of light and darkness in his first letter. Chapter 1 verses 5 to 10:

'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.'

In chapter 2 John's words become even more solemn. Verses 9 to 11: 'Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.'

Blinded him.

In John chapter 9 Jesus encountered a man who was physically blind and he restored his sight. It soon emerged that he was spiritually blind, but Jesus met that need too, and as the long chapter unfolds that spiritual blindness gave way to sight, coming to a climax in verse 38: 'The man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him.'

But as that long chapter unfolds we see a group of men who thought they had all the answers. They were proud of their own righteousness and quick to condemn other people. Because they wouldn't admit their sin, because they couldn't see their need, they were more blind than the sightless beggar they so despised.

Their problem was not just darkness but blindness.

Jesus can forgive your sins and lead you from darkness to light, from hatred to love, from guilt to forgiveness, from God's anger to God's salvation. He is the light of the world. Don't stumble around in the darkness when you could be walking in the light.