

## MOTTO TEXT 2006 – JOHN 8:12

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

Light is a very potent image. The Bible has a lot to say about it. It's there on the very first page of God's word in the account of creation. 'And God said, "Let there be light."' On the first day God created light and God saw that the light was good. He separated the light from the darkness, creating day and night.

Light enables us to see. Light gives us colour. Light makes things grow. Light lifts our spirits. In the words of Psalm 36 verse 9, 'In your light we see light.' *Creation light.*

The next specific mention of light doesn't occur till Exodus chapter 10, the second last plague which fell upon the Egyptians before the exodus. Verses 21 to 23: 'Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived.'

If ever you've had to travel through thick fog on a dark winter night you'll know what this was like. Darkness here was a judgment. But all the people of Israel had light. They were saved from judgment. They were kept separate, kept safe. *Salvation light.*

After the exodus when the children of Israel had left Egypt they had to make their way through the desert to the promised land. Exodus chapter 13 verses 21 and 22 say, 'By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.' *Guiding light.*

Almost as soon as the Israelites had gone Pharaoh realised what he had lost. His slave work-force had gone. He led his army out to bring them back. They soon caught up with the Israelites and hemmed them in. The Egyptian army was on one side and the sea on the other. The people were terrified. We pick up the story at Exodus chapter 14 verse 19. 'Then the angel of God, who had been travelling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.' Darkness to the one side and light to the other side. *Protecting light.*

When the LORD gave Moses instructions for the tabernacle, the sacred place where atonement was made for sin, where offerings were made in worship, part of the furniture was a lampstand. Exodus chapter 25 tells us that it was made of pure gold, that it was very ornate, with intricate mouldings and branches carrying seven lamps. The lampstand was designed to resemble a plant, with branches and flowers. The weight of the gold was balanced by the delicacy of the design. This was no utilitarian piece of furniture but a thing of great beauty and great value. Functional yes, but it was also beautiful and valuable. *Sacred light.*

2 Samuel chapter 22 records a song composed and sung by David when the LORD delivered him from all his enemies. In verse 29 he says, 'You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light.' We find another version of the same song in Psalm 18. There David slightly alters the words: 'You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.'

There are all sorts of images of light in the Old Testament. There's creation light. There's fire light. Later in the prophets we find images of daylight. We are familiar with the words of Isaiah 9:2, 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.' Malachi foresees a day when light will be like the shining of the sun. 'But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings' (Malachi 4:2).

In Isaiah chapter 60 verses 19 and 20 the prophet foresees a light even greater than that of the sun. 'The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.'

What a comfort that is for those who are sad. *Everlasting light*.

But perhaps at the start of a new year the image that resonates most with us is that of the lamp. It's something personal – individual. 'You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning. My God turns *my* darkness into light.'

Against this Old Testament background we come to the New Testament and the Gospel of John. John picks up these allusions in his first chapter. He reminds us of the role of Jesus in creation. 'All things were made through him and nothing that has been made was made without him.' Jesus is not part of the creation but the creator.

John goes on, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men.' He is 'the true light that gives light to everyone'.

John has an enigmatic phrase in verse 5. 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.' You'll see in the margin of the NIV an alternative translation. 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.' These translations are quite different. The darkness has not *understood* it. That's negative. The darkness has not *overcome* it. That's very positive.

So what note is John trying to sound? The tragedy of the world's rejection or the glory of the Lord's salvation? These translations are both based on the same text. The verb carries both meanings and only the context tells you which meaning is the intended one. However in this context both make good sense and I think John is deliberately using this word to underline the paradox of Christ's coming.

The light is shining in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. Verses 10 and 11: 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to what belonged to him, but his own people did not receive him.' The tragedy when light is rejected.

But John goes on: 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.' The glory when light is accepted. John says, 'The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory.'

As Jesus performed miracles the light burst through the darkness, the darkness of human need in all its forms. Chapter 2 verse 11: 'This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.'

But there was also resistance. John chapter 3 verses 19, 20: 'This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.'

Darkness is a symbol of ignorance. But more than that, it's a symbol of evil, rebellion, selfishness and sin. When the light of Jesus shines into the darkness of our souls it's

uncomfortable, it's humiliating, it's shameful. But if we shut out the light, that darkness will harbour dirt and disease and we will be condemned in God's sight.

All this brings us to our motto text. John chapter 8 verse 12. 'When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

This is one of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus in which he deliberately incorporates the Old Testament name of God, 'I am'. Everything that God is Jesus is. The great Creator, the great Saviour, the great Leader, the great Protector, the Holy Light, the everlasting Light.

As we stand on the threshold of another year we can know that light in our lives, courage to face our problems, wisdom to guide our steps, power to defeat our enemies, holiness to lift us higher.

The alternative is to cling to the shadows, to hide in the darkness, refusing to admit our need, wandering aimlessly and ignorantly near the deep precipices of the soul.

If we want to avoid the darkness, to avoid the danger, we can. Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

As human beings we've been created to be followers. When we're very small we follow our parents. When we're in our teens we follow our heroes. As we get older we may not think so much in those terms but we are still followers. We're always looking outwards at other people, and consciously or unconsciously following some and refusing to follow others.

Who are you following. Who will you trust? If we follow Jesus we will never walk in darkness. That 'never' is emphatic. No way will we walk in darkness. We will have the light of life.