

## THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matthew 5:14–16

Our motto text for this year is John 8:12 and we looked at it back in January. Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

When we explored the Old Testament background to that the first thing we found was *creation light*. At the very beginning God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. When we moved on to Exodus we saw *salvation light*. During the ten plagues the Egyptians were plunged into darkness but all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived. After the exodus God went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. *Guiding light*. When Pharaoh's army pursued them the cloud brought darkness to one side and light to the other side. *Protecting light*. In the tabernacle part of the furniture was a golden lampstand. *Sacred light*. As the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of future glory he said, '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.' *Everlasting light*.

All of this underlines the essential nature of God. John summed it up in his first letter. 'God is light and there is absolutely no darkness in him whatsoever' (I John 1:5). The Old Testament underlines this truth again and again. 'Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD' (Psalm 4:6). 'The LORD is my light and my salvation' (Psalm 27:1). 'With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light' (Psalm 36:9). 'Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me' (Psalm 43:3). 'Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD' (Psalm 89:15). 'He wraps himself in light as with a garment' (Psalm 104:2). 'The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us' (Psalm 118:27).

When Jesus came and declared himself the light of the world he was making a great claim. As the light of the world he was claiming to be our Creator, our Saviour, our Guide, our Protector, the Holy One, the Everlasting Light. He could say, 'I and the Father are one ... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me.' When Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world,' he was claiming equality with God the Father.

But here in Matthew 5 verse 14 Jesus says to his followers, 'You are the light of the world'. What does that mean?

We find a clue in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah where he talks about the servant of the LORD. The Servant is identified first as Israel in chapter 41 verses 8 to 10. 'But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.'

In the first of those beautiful passages known as the Servant Songs the LORD says this to his Servant in chapter 42 verses 6 and 7: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.'

Israel were God's chosen people. But that choice was not made on the basis of any special merit or because they were superior to every other nation. Rather God's choice of Israel and the tremendous grace he showed towards them was so that they, in turn, would bring the light of God to the other nations of the world. 'I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the

dungeon those who sit in darkness.’ God’s chosen people were to be like a liberator, entering a dank dungeon where captives lay languishing in the darkness without help and without hope. As they entered they would bring light and freedom and life, the liberating light of God himself. They were to be a covenant for the people. In other words, their presence would be the guarantee of God’s goodness.

God made this promise in Isaiah 42 verse 16. ‘I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.’

But, sadly, Israel did not live up to their high calling. Instead of leading the blind they became blind. Instead of turning the nations from idolatry they themselves turned to idols. So God says, in verses 18 to 20, ‘Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.’

As Isaiah’s prophecy unfolds we find a new development. God repeats the promise to send his servant, this time to bring Israel back to himself and then to be a light for the Gentiles. Chapter 49 verses 5 and 6: ‘And now the LORD says — he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength — he says: It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

This Servant of the LORD was none other than Jesus and as the Servant Songs bring us to chapter 53 we discover that he is the Suffering Servant, despised, rejected, smitten, oppressed, afflicted, crushed, cut off. But Isaiah says, ‘After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light and be satisfied’ (53:11).

So it is that when Jesus came, the Servant of the LORD, he could say in truth, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ God’s plan for Israel to be a light to the nations was narrowed down to just one person, Jesus, the only one who perfectly fulfilled the role of the Servant of the LORD.

But now there’s a further development. Starting with the one man, Jesus, chosen by God, there’s an expansion of the elect. Jesus says to his followers, ‘You are the light of the world.’ Notice that, the light of the *world*. This is the church’s commission. Our parish is the world.

That’s why when Jesus gave the great commission, recorded at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, he said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

Jesus used two illustrations for us to think about. *He used the illustration of a city*, verse 14. ‘A city on a hill cannot be hidden.’ This is a picture of the church, not the individual. All the lights of the city merge together to form a single light by which travellers can make their journey and find their way home. The church has that function. We live in a world of darkness where people are travelling in darkness, scarcely knowing where they have come from or where they are going. The church is to be a light for people in darkness, shining with the light of truth, integrity, compassion, commitment.

Always, ringing through the pages of the New Testament there are warnings from the Old Testament, Israel's failure to live up to their high calling. There are those solemn words from 1 Corinthians chapter 10 (verses 7 to 12).

'Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did —and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did —and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did —and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!'

*Jesus also used the illustration of a lamp.* This is a much more homely picture. This is applicable not so much to the church as a whole but to the Christian as an individual. If you claimed to be a city set on a hill you might be accused of having ideas above your station, but a lamp in a room is much more modest – and yet no less effective. When the lamp is lit everything in the room is light.

That is the influence that a single Christian can have: in a home, in an office, in a class, in a factory, in a club. I think Jesus had a twinkle in his eye when he said this: 'You don't light a lamp and then put it under a bowl.' Don't hide your light. Let it shine.

What happens when you put an oil lamp under a bowl? Most obviously, you don't get light. But also there's a danger that the lamp will go out completely for lack of oxygen. At best it won't be fulfilling its function properly. There's a further danger that even if it doesn't go out it may set the bowl alight and start a house fire. Far from doing good it becomes destructive and dangerous.

Don't hide your light. Let it shine. Verse 16. 'In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' The light is your good deeds, good actions: kindness, helpfulness, loyalty, sympathy, practical help.

And the point of letting your light shine is to bring praise to your Father in heaven. That means not just actions but words, the testimony of your lips as well as your life. If by the grace of God you live a good life, loving, patient, helpful, kind – and you never acknowledge God in your conversation, what will people say? They will say, 'What a lovely person. I wish more people were like that.' What's missing? Praise for your heavenly Father.

Let your light shine, and tell people where the light is from.

God *is* light, and from day one God has been seeking ways of letting that light shine into the world. He chose Israel to be his servant but the light didn't shine. Finally he sent his Son. 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ... Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.'

People have rejected the light but the light still shines. The darkness has not overcome it.' 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 the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'