

Light of the World

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 0 0] You know that winter in Scotland is dark, right? There are other words we could use to describe it, but I reckon the word dark sums it pretty well. It's dark when we go to work. It's dark when we go home. It's dark when we get up.

It's dark when we go to bed. Even the rain seems not to be watercoloured, but to have a slightly darker tinge about it. Now, to be fair, when the sun shines and it's dry, Scotland's a very nice place, but let's be even fairer. It's not often like this.

Most of the time, it's dark. There is a tribe of indigenous Indians in the Amazon rainforest basin, which have 14 names for mosquitoes.

The Inuit Eskimos have seven different names for types of snow. And we Scots have a range of words for dark. It's drich. That's what they'd say.

Or, they might say in Aberdeenshire, it's murk. Sometimes the dark outside translates into a dark inside, which is one of the reasons Scots seem so prone to dark thoughts.

[1 : 1 4] You can just imagine the poster saying, you don't have to be from Scotland to have a bleak outlook on life, but if you are, it helps. The truth is, actually, you don't have to be from Scotland to experience inner darkness at all.

Many of those in the world into which Jesus was born had so-called Drich Hart syndrome. I may be wrong, but I suspect I'm not when I say that despite all the technological advances of the last few years, people are no happier today than they were 10 years ago, 100 years ago, or even 2,000 years ago.

One of the wonderful things about the Christmas season is that it gives us the opportunity to stand back for a while and think about what real light is.

Yes, the story is filled with light. The light of the star guiding the wise men to the stable, the light of an angel appearing to the shepherds in the fields at night.

But the greatest of all lights is the child who's born, Jesus Christ the Lord. That stable, though it boasted no electric lights, was a brighter place than the sun itself on the day Jesus was born because the light of God had come into the world.

[2 : 4 3] Some days after Jesus' birth, his parents took him to Jerusalem in order to perform all the rituals required by the Jewish law. And it was there in the temple precincts they were met by Simeon, an impossibly old man who had been waiting his whole life for the birth of the Messiah.

His eyes were growing dim with age, but his heart was filled with joy when he held that child Jesus in his arms. And in Luke 2 verse 32, Simeon says of this child, he is a light for revelation to the Gentiles.

He's a light for revelation to the Gentiles. This is who Jesus Christ is. He is a light for revelation to the world. He is a light for revelation to the world. The beautiful light of God come to the world, for the world.

He it is who will deal with our Drichart syndrome, the inner darkness. His birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, lightens the murk and dispels the dark.

As we continue to build up to Christmas, I want to suggest to you that Jesus coming brings light into four perplexing areas of the human experience.

[4 : 05] that without Jesus coming, we'd still be in the darkness of these things. In his coming, he brings the light of meaning, of comfort, of forgiveness and of hope.

No doubt many of us will have already put up our Christmas trees we did yesterday and decorated them with lights. Half of ours don't work. When you get home today, look at those lights.

Remember the four areas in which Jesus brings light in the darkness. Meaning, comfort, forgiveness and hope.

First of all, the light of meaning. The light of meaning. Thousands of years ago, King Solomon said of life lived under the sun, a life lived with no God.

That it was utterly meaningless. Fearless, vanity and a chasing after the wind. Nothing has changed. A world without God remains a world without true meaning.

[5 : 14] You wouldn't think of it by looking at our society today. We live in a society which offers altogether too many meanings or none at all. For some, meaning is found in the pursuit of religion.

For others, in the pursuit of pleasure. For still others, the pursuit of some kind of secular utopia, whatever that is. For the vast majority, however, we're just too busy or too distracted to give the question of ultimate meaning any deep thought.

I wonder if you heard me there that we live in a society which offers altogether too many meanings, but none at all. Perhaps I could more accurately say we live in a society which offers too many false meanings because it's got no real meanings to offer.

Let me say that again. We live in a society which has too many false meanings because it has no real meanings to offer. Everyone, whoever they are, wants to know what the meaning of their life is.

that's the way we are built as human beings to ask questions and to seek answers. We want to know why we are here. Evangelical atheists tell us that there is no ultimate meaning and therefore it is pointless to ask the question of meaning.

[6 : 42] Successive generations of our children are growing up, being confronted by a meaningless universe on a meaningless existence rather on a meaningless planet in a meaningless universe.

But the problem of course is that we know this simply isn't true. Human beings are built to ask these questions. As our society moves away from the foundation of its meaning in God it doesn't lose that sense of a search for ultimate meaning.

Instinctively the vast majority of us know that the evangelical atheists are wrong. That there is ultimate meaning to be found. But because our society doesn't know God it tries to find that meaning in all different kinds of places.

In work, in religion, in pleasure, in family, in experience. But the problem is that none of these foundations fit. In fact, if we add to the list addiction or despair, we can say of them all they are intended to distract us from where true meaning can be found in life, not to guide us there.

Jesus is the light of the world and in him there is ultimate meaning. That meaning which satisfies our hearts with our relationship to God and our minds with the reason of God.

[8 : 17] In the birth of a child 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, the universe was given its meaning that everything exists through him, to him, and for him.

The multitude of explanations of what life is all about we hear in society today is the conscious human attempt to suppress the real meaning of our existence in this universe, namely that all things exist through Jesus Christ, to Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ.

I guess one of the things that we can do in Scotland if it's not cloudy, which isn't often, in Scotland at night is to look up at the stars, and you look and you see them scattered across the sky, and then you try and focus your eyes and you see shapes and you see patterns, the great constellations of Aries and Leo and Pisces, and then you begin to see more and more stars further away.

And then perhaps you detect a slightly lighter band across the sky we call the Milky Way, and then you notice stars which don't twinkle, and you realise that you're looking at other planets in our solar system.

You get that sense of wonder, and you just want to stand back and say, wow. But very soon after, if you're anything like me anyway, that wow thought is turned inward and becomes a why thought.

[9 : 55] Why does this all exist? Why do I exist? What is my place in the vastness of this universe? And then at this very point, the question of meaning becomes the single most important issue in your life.

I've been there, I'm sure many of you have as well. Now here's the problem. In our society, the evangelical atheists want to shut this question up and insist that, in light of there being no ultimate meaning, it is pointless to ask why.

But don't you think this is a very curious position to hold for people who boast in their skills of reason and logic? That it's okay to ask every single question of every single subject except, don't dare ask the question, why?

You see, such a position is self-evidently inconsistent. As human beings, we all want to know why. Because we want to know what our place in the universe is, what the meaning of our life is.

Well, in the temple of Jerusalem that day, 2,000 years ago, this old man, Simeon, declares the truth. The meaning of the universe, the meaning of our existences, the meaning of our lives is wrapped up in the child he's holding in his arms, Jesus Christ.

[11 : 21] The light in the darkness of a meaningless existence. The light for which you and I were created. The only light in whom we can find ultimate satisfaction for heart and mind.

Jesus Christ. Don't you know that you were created to find your ultimate meaning in him and that outside the light of knowing him, everything is the light of meaning.

Second, the light of comfort, the light of comfort. December the 25th really is no respect to the persons nor their preferences, as some in our congregation have discovered to their considerable cost.

The same kind of tragedies happen on Christmas Day as happen every other day. I wish I could say different, but I can't. Wouldn't it be wonderful if what the mid-20th century preachers taught was true?

That at Christmas time all the petty arguments we have with each other would disappear never to return? That on Christmas Day everything would be sweetness and light for all of us? Wouldn't it be wonderful if on Christmas Day of all days all wars would cease?

[12 : 37] all abusive relationships would end and all hospital deaths would be put on hold at least until Boxing Day. The truth is we don't live in a world like this.

We never have. You'll know the story of how during the First World War, incredible story, soldiers from both the British and German armies emerged from their trenches on Christmas Day to play football against each other.

Unfortunately, a mile to the north and a mile to the south on the Great Western Front that day, British men and German men were being killed just as on any other day.

There is no real comfort to be found in this world for the pain that some experience on Christmas Day or any other day. Well, one of the ways in which human beings try to find comfort is by numbing themselves to the pain.

Our society is a bewildering array of weapons in its arsenal to try and help us numb ourselves against the pain. Alcohol, narcotics, possessions, pleasure, and so forth.

[13 : 50] I've heard it said that many alcoholics talk about one of the reasons they drink is because it just takes the edge off. well, don't go looking to the evangelical atheists of our day for any comfort because you certainly won't get it from them.

And don't go looking to the secular media because they've got nothing to offer except more distraction. Don't go looking to religion because it can be used in exactly the same way as alcohol or narcotics to take the edge off.

On Christmas Day, I'm going to be thinking about my father and Kathmer's father. Alive or dead, who will you be thinking about on Christmas Day?

Who will you be missing? And when we think of them, what will we do? Go to the drinks cabinet, fill our shot glass, turn on the television to watch Gavin and Stacey and try to forget?

Look at their photographs, silently weep. What will we use to take the edge off? Without the coming of Jesus Christ, without the bright shining of his light, there is no lasting comfort to be found anywhere.

[15 : 17] The birth of Jesus Christ is God's assurance that he knows about us and he loves us. That he's come not just to be among us, but to be with us and one of us, to experience for himself the grinding sense of loss, the pain of betrayal and the salty taste of loneliness.

He stands with us, as one of us, for us, holding us up when it looks like we're going to fall. I'm not talking here of the pursuit of theology.

theology. I'm not talking here of the mere knowledge of God. I'm talking about the lived experience of God being with us through Jesus Christ by his Holy Spirit, comforting us with his daily presence and giving us the peace that passes all understanding.

there ain't no drug or positive mental attitude which compares with the simple yet amazing truth that the Jesus born in Bethlehem is with us in our grief, in our confusion and our fear.

He's with us not just when the two sides emerge from the trenches and play football against each other, but he's with us a mile to the north and south on the western front.

[16 : 45] He's with us not to judge us, not to look down upon us, but to pick us up when we fall, to comfort us in our heart syndrome.

That's the true light of Christmas's comfort. God with us in this child. Jesus Christ, don't you know that you can only really find ultimate comfort in him?

And that outside of his comforting presence in our lives, everything's three. Third, the light of forgiveness.

The third aspect in which Jesus is the beautiful light, the light of forgiveness. Does anyone here know anything about guilt and shame? Guilt and shame? There are few experiences as dark as knowing that we are wrong about something, in fact, not just wrong about something, we're just plain wrong.

Christmas is a time of year when we look back at the past year, and you know what often strikes us? Aren't the good times? The things we did wrong?

[17 : 54] The people we hurt? The bad decisions we made? Or just that knowing sense that all is not right with us? And the problem isn't the world outside us, us.

It's us. I'm sure many of you will have noticed a marked shift in our society in the past 30 years. But as before, I suppose when I was a student, there was such a thing as right and wrong.

Now there isn't. It's all a matter of lifestyle and choice. The philosophical position known as postmodernism about which we were warned as students and scoffed at, has removed the category of absolute right and wrong from our vocabulary or worldview.

There is no such thing as sin any longer because there is no absolute standard of right and wrong. And yet for all of society's insistence that there is no such thing as sin and we really shouldn't be that ashamed of our choices and actions, we still experience in our hearts that sense of guilt and shame which as human beings we were built to possess.

The elephant in the room when it comes to a postmodern understanding of absolute right and wrong is the human experience of sin and guilt and shame. A burning conscience.

[19 : 27] A heart which isn't at rest within itself. For many the path to forgiveness lies in denying wrongdoing.

I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm just following the desires of my heart. Isn't that okay? Of course that doesn't work.

For others the path to forgiveness lies in suppressing the voice of conscience by giving in to the pace of modern life or by dulling the senses with substance abuse.

But of course that doesn't work either. What's so good about Christmas is the light the birth of Jesus brings into the darkness of our guilty hearts.

Because this child born in the arms of Simeon will one day bear the sins in his body and soul that we've committed against God.

[20 : 29] the guilt and shame we feel before God. This child born in Bethlehem and dedicated in this temple is the Lamb of God whose perfect life, whose sacrificial death, whose victorious resurrection will take away the sins of the world.

Yes, even my own guilt and even my own shame too. In his birth we hear the voice of God saying to us, you are more sinful than you could ever dream in your worst nightmare.

but because of Jesus you are more forgiven than you could imagine in your brightest daydream. So we put up our Christmas trees and we look admiringly upon them but this child born in Bethlehem was destined to die on another kind of tree for our sin and guilt and in so doing to take all our sin away.

This is the real light of forgiveness. Not the philosophical denial of the reality of guilt or the suppression of our shame.

This is God's answer to murky heart syndrome. The darkness of our broken consciences, the inward pain it brings us. Jesus, this child born in Bethlehem, born to be saviour of his people.

[21 : 52] Do you know that you can find only in him ultimate forgiveness? And that outside of his forgiveness everything is tree.

The light of forgiveness. And then finally the light of hope. The light of hope. I said these words on Wednesday night at our prayer meeting.

It's been said that a man can live for 40 days without food. He can live for four days without water. He can live for four minutes without air, but he can only live for four seconds without hope.

Hope. Dante's Inferno is a picture of hell with the sign, Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. To be sure, a world with no hope is a hell on earth because hope is the essence of human existence.

One of the worst of all the atrocities committed by the Nazis in their concentration camps was the suppression of all hope. They would take a group of Jewish men and equip them with picks and shovels.

[23 : 08] They would take these men to a part of the compound in which there was a pile of stones. And they would order these men to move the stones from one place to another place.

The next day, the Nazis would take these same men out and order them to move the same pile of stones from where they had been, from where they were to where they'd been before.

The next day, they'd order these men back to that pile of stones to move them to another part of the compound. And the next day, so on, and so on, and so on.

It wasn't long before these Jewish men lost all hope and one by one committed suicide. It was the cruelest of all things to do to suppress their hope.

And yet I can't help feeling that sometimes the world in which we live does exactly the same to us. There are times, are there not, when we feel rather like rats in a maze. Or as one of my favorite bands, Radiohead, puts it, cats tied to sticks.

[24 : 18] The more God has been edged out of our society, the less hope we have as a society. People try to find hope in all different kinds of avenues, but finally, when all hope is lost, they give in to the experience of Dante's Inferno.

Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. begin to act like machine-coded robots, living in the darkness, never knowing that Jesus Christ is a light of hope.

That is, after all, what Simeon saw in the eyes of the baby Jesus held in his arms in the temple that day. The hope of the world. In one of his most famous books, *The Court of the Morning*, the Scottish author, John Buchan, asks the question, what is the meaning of life if it all ends in six feet of dirt?

What is the meaning of life if it all ends in six feet of dirt? The answer to the question of our despair is found in the eyes of the child Simeon was holding in his arms that day.

The child born in Bethlehem is the one in whom we have eternal life. Not just here and now, but life forever. And not just in quantity, but also in quality.

[25 : 35] He himself said, I have come so that you may have life and life to the full. The light of the eternal life, Jesus, born, died, and raised, that light gives us a brighter sun than anything this dark, hopeless society can offer us.

When I was a teenager, I guess I was Jonathan's age, having just become a Christian, I used to wear a badge with a rainbow on it. Couldn't do that nowadays. With a rainbow on it, saying, there is hope.

In the 30 years since then, the society in which I've lived has become way more despairing. But for me at least, the Christian gospel has become far more hopeful.

Because the more I get to know the light of Jesus, the more hope I have for this life, and the life which is to come. The answer to Drie Hart syndrome is found in only one place, Jesus Christ.

I wonder whether you can recognize yourself here at all, scratching about in the darkness of a meaningless existence, a painful experience, of a guilty conscience, of a despairing constitution.

[27 : 02] It is dark outside in Scotland at wintertime, but it's even darker in your heart, and you know it. Call it what it is. Call it Drie.

Call it Merck. Call it what you want to. The truth is, you've done everything you can to suppress it, but it has not worked. Let me announce to you that the light of meaning, comfort, forgiveness, and hope can be found in only one place.

The light of Christmas is the coming of Jesus Christ. So by all means, let's look at the lights on our Christmas trees and reflect on the coming of Jesus as the light of our meaning, comfort, forgiveness, and hope.

How though shall these lights shine in our darkness? Of course, we'll turn on our Christmas lights at the wall, but how shall the coming of Jesus bring light into our hearts and minds?

By faith in him. That's the answer. By faith in him. By holding Jesus in our arms and saying of him, there is no light to be found in this world, except only in you, Jesus.

[28 : 25] And in you, Jesus, I want to live today and always. Let us pray. Amen.

Amen. Thank you. Amen. Amen. .