

I Am the Light of the World

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of February 2004.

The preacher is Tim Johnson. His sermon is entitled I Am the Light of the World and is based on John chapter 8 verses 12 to 20.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can examine your word now and we ask that you would teach us. We pray that you would teach us more about who Jesus is and we pray that you would help us to respond appropriately to him.

Amen. Please sit down. You might like to open John chapter 8 verses 12 to 20 in your Bibles. When I was in year 9 at high school as part of our outdoor education camp, we went on a caving trip. It wasn't a particularly difficult cave. We weren't crawling through really tight spaces or anything like that, thank goodness. We were travelling through as a group just walking through this cave system. However, when we were about halfway through our expedition and when the person in front of me was far enough ahead and the person behind me was a similar distance behind, my torch stopped working.

[1 : 30] Now, I don't know whether you've ever experienced the darkness of a cave. It is totally and utterly dark. Not the sort of darkness that we're used to if we go out on the streets at night, even on a dark night, but completely pitch black to the point that even if you hold your hand right in front of your face as close as you can, you still can't see it.

So what was I to do in such a situation? I stumbled around for a short time in the dark, but I was totally disoriented. I didn't even know whether if I walked forward I was about to walk into a wall or even worse, about to walk off the edge of a precipice.

I was totally isolated and completely powerless. It was only at that point that fortunately a light pierced the darkness.

The boy who was walking along behind me had finally caught up and his light just shone through that darkness showing the way. And for the rest of the trip, provided that I stuck with that friend of mine and more importantly that I followed his light and where it was shining, then I was safe and I was able to navigate my way and get safely out of the cave.

Well, in John 8, verse 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.

[3 : 04] What did Jesus mean by this? What was he trying to say about himself? Well, to understand what Jesus is saying, we need to understand the context in which he was speaking.

We need to understand how the image of light is used in the Old Testament, but we also need to look at the immediate context in which Jesus is speaking in the Gospel of John.

Well, if we look back into the Old Testament, we see that the Old Testament is full of allusions to light. Light is used as a metaphor to speak of God.

So, if we have a look at Psalm 27, verse 1, we read, The Lord is my light and my salvation. But the image is also used to speak of God's Word.

So, if we have a look at Psalm 119, verse 105, we read, Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

[4 : 09] But light is also used to speak of the servant of the Lord, God's promised Messiah or King that he would send. And in Isaiah 49, 6, we see God saying to this servant, I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

So, we consider there's actually a variety there in the Old Testament as to how that image of light is used. And yet there's similarity between each of those pictures. You might have noticed as we looked at them that all of them are speaking in some way about God's salvation.

God is a guiding light who saves. Or God's Word shines like a light and guides the path in which to walk. Or the servant of the Lord will shine so that Gentiles, non-Jews, will see and be saved. There's similar ideas, but they seem to be attached to different people in the Old Testament in the way that they are used. Apparently different characters. The servant of the Lord, the Word of God or God himself.

Of course, as we think about it, we see that each one of those fits with Jesus, but which one is Jesus trying to bring to mind when he says he is the light of the world?

[5 : 39] Well, to understand this, Jesus' immediate context is very helpful. And if you have a look at the beginning of verse 12, you see that the verse starts with the word again. Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying...

And most commentators believe that this draws us back into John chapter 7 and into the context spoken about there, where Jesus is addressing the crowds in the temple at Jerusalem at the Festival of Tabernacles, or as it's also called the Festival of Booths.

I think it's called that in the NRSV. Now, the Festival of Tabernacles was one of the three great festivals in Jesus' time for which people would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival.

The other two festivals are Passover and the Festival of Weeks. But the Festival of Tabernacles was a seven-day event where people were required to live in huts or in tabernacles or booths, which is where the name for the festival comes from.

They had to build these huts out of branches and the idea was to remind them that that is how they lived after the exodus out of Egypt.

[6 : 54] This festival was an occasion for great rejoicing and there's a passage which I was able to find from the Mishnah which described what takes place at this festival. This is what it says.

Towards the end of the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, people went down into the court of women. Golden lamps were there and four golden bowls were on each of them and four ladders were by each.

Four young men from the priestly group of youths had jugs of oil in their hands containing about 120 logs and poured oil from them into the individual bowls.

Wicks were made from the discarded trousers of the priests and from their girdles. There was no court in Jerusalem that was not bright from that light.

Men of piety and known for their good works danced with torches in their hands and sang songs and praises. And it is in that context, at that festival, in that very courtyard, as John chapter 8 verse 20 indicates by speaking about the treasury, standing in front of those huge burning lights which cast their light over all of Jerusalem, that Jesus stands and says, I am the light of the world.

[8 : 19] Jesus is making conscious reference to the lamps that are standing there behind him and he is saying that he is the fulfilment of what the lamps symbolise.

Now the purpose of the lamps was to remind the people that during their wandering in the desert after their exodus from Egypt, God had been present with them by a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night.

So we read in Exodus chapter 13 verses 21 and 22, the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them along the way and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light so that they might travel by day and by night.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. In this way, God guided his people so they knew the way to go so that they could find their way to the promised land and so that they would be protected from anyone who might attack them.

Jesus' statement that he is the light is meant to remind people of this wilderness experience and the light from the pillar of fire that guided and saved them.

[9 : 43] Now that's not to say that these other Old Testament allusions to light that we looked at earlier are not part of what Jesus is saying. It's possible that his statement encompasses them too.

But the focus, the primary focus of what Jesus is saying should be on this idea of God's presence before his people in this pillar of fire after the Exodus.

There are two further things in what Jesus says which back up this understanding. You'll notice in verse 12 that after claiming to be the light Jesus insists that the right response is to follow him.

He doesn't talk about people receiving the light or walking in the light but he says that people should follow just like Israel did in the wilderness.

Secondly, this is one of the seven I am sayings in John's Gospel and we're going to look at two others over the next couple of weeks at this service. They're very powerful statements by Jesus because in them he adopts for himself the name of God, the name Yahweh meaning I am.

[10:59] He says in emphatic terms I am the light of the world. He's stating that he can work, speak and act on behalf of God.

He's applying the divine name of God and God's authoritative presence to himself. It was God who was present with Israel in the wilderness, in the cloud and in the fire.

It was God that guided them. It was God that protected them. But Jesus says I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

He's taking the role of God as the source of salvation, the one that people need to follow, the one who gives life and the one who rescues people from darkness and applying it to himself.

And the Pharisees don't like it. You'll notice in verse 13 however that they're not willing to attack his claim head on but rather they try and trip him up with a legal technicality.

[12:12] They point out in verse 13 that his testimony is not valid because he's testifying on his own behalf. And in the Jewish law two or three witnesses were required to support a claim.

But there is Jesus standing on his own standing as his own witness. But you'll notice Jesus isn't phased by their question and in verses 14 to 18 he counters their argument.

He insists that his witness is true because he knows where he's come from and where he's going.

He knows that he's come from God the Father and that he's going back to God the Father.

But the Pharisees don't know this. They're judging by human standards. Indeed Jesus argues even by human standards even according to the Jewish law his testimony is valid.

He has the witnesses that are required because the father testifies for him. The father backs up his claims and ensures that his testimony is valid.

[13:19] Now I don't know how comfortable you are with Jesus' response to the Pharisees. When I first read it I thought it could have been a stronger argument from Jesus responding to the Pharisees.

Surely Jesus could have done something like appealed to some human witnesses to back him up. Some people who would come forward and support him. Perhaps he could have even done a sign to support the claim that he was making.

God the father who the Pharisees couldn't see. But in fact any other answer that Jesus might have given would have been weaker and less convincing than the answer that he gives.

We must remember that Jesus is claiming to be God. That is a claim to ultimate authority and that is the sort of claim that cannot be backed up by appeal to inferior witnesses.

Imagine that someone came in here this morning, stood up the front and they claimed that they are the greatest mathematician of all time. Quite naturally we might ask them to give us some proof of their claim.

[14:33] And they might try and demonstrate by saying things like well I can show you that 3 times 12 equals 36. And we could check that off in our heads and we could say yep they've got that right that's quite correct but it's hardly a proof of the claim that they're making is it?

If we can do the problems in order to check that they're correct then it's not a proof of their claim to be the greatest mathematician of all time. Eventually they might be forced to do some highly complex mathematical problem which goes beyond even the best ability of the greatest mathematician here amongst us.

But then how would we know that they weren't just fudging some result? How would we know that their claim is actually true? You see they're forced to prove their claim by going beyond something that we can see or know or understand.

And that's the problem with trying to prove absolute authority. If Jesus is God as he's claiming to be then appealing to human witnesses won't work.

Human witness is frail, subjective and ultimately insufficient. He can't do anything stronger than appeal to himself as a witness and appeal to God the Father to support his claim because he must appeal to authority that is equal to the claim that he is making.

[16:07] Indeed that makes sense too as we think about the image of light that Jesus is using. How does light prove that it's light? Anything else which is trying to prove what it is, a cup, requires light so that we can see it and see what it is.

But light isn't illuminated by anything else. It illuminates other things. Light bears witness to itself.

It can't help but attest to its own presence. And that really shows up the blindness of the Pharisees. Here they are standing in front of the light of the world.

They're seeing what he does. They're hearing what he says. They're seeing the way that he contrasts with the darkness of human sinfulness.

And yet they ask him to prove himself. When I was back in the darkness of the cave and that light pierced the darkness, I didn't ask it to prove that it was light.

[17 : 27] It was clear that it was light by what it did. And yet the Pharisees standing in front of the light of the world, seeing what he does, do not see.

They are judging according to human standards. And as Jesus goes on to point out in verse 19, it is clear that they do not know him. And because they do not know him, they also do not know God the Father.

Jesus is God in human form. He's the one who reveals God and shows people what God is like. If the Pharisees do not know Jesus as he stands before them, then they don't know God either.

You cannot have the Father without Jesus. And that's the challenge that lies in front of each one of us this morning. Jesus' bold claim, God is true today.

I am the light of the world. I am the light of life. It is true today and it requires a response from us.

[18 : 38] Indeed, the witness that Jesus appealed to, God the Father, has backed up the claims that Jesus made powerfully by raising him from the dead. the Father has shown that Jesus' testimony is true, that he is who he claimed to be.

The question is, what are we going to do about it? Of course, like the Pharisees, we can try and manoeuvre our way out of responding to Jesus by some sort of technicality.

We might say, well, you can't really prove these sorts of things. there's so much uncertainty around so many different religious claims. How are we really to know that Jesus is who he claims to be? Well, it's a good way to avoid responding to Jesus, but it won't help us at all. All it will do is leave us stranded in the darkness.

The implication of Jesus' statement, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, is that failure to respond to Jesus, leaves us in darkness.

[19 : 50] It doesn't matter whether failure to follow him is in the form of outright rejection, saying that you want nothing to do with him, or whether it's just through a lukewarm failure to commit to him.

Sadly, the result is the same, that we are left in the darkness. Now, the only right response to Jesus' claim is to do what he says and to follow him.

And the implication in the original language of Jesus saying to people, follow him, is the idea of continual action. It's not a one-off. It's about following Jesus continually, every day.

That's what is required. Just like when I was stuck in the cave and my friend came with the light, it wouldn't have helped me to follow him for a short time and then to have stopped.

I needed to follow him, right behind him, continually, each step of the way until we reach the end, until we reach safety and we're out of the cave.

[20 : 52] And that's what we must do with Jesus too. We must follow him and we must follow him continually, each step of the way, each day, staying with Jesus and following him until the end.

If we do this, then we will indeed experience what Jesus promises in all its fulfilment. We will know the light of life.

We will know life with him and with God the Father forever in his glorious kingdom. And that's the very picture that we're given at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, the image of what it is like to be there with Jesus and with the Father.

This is what it says. And there will be no more night. They need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever.

Amen. for the children.

[22 : 19] They need no armor and anything that even the Lord want toll is lost mijn