

Advent Week 1: Light - 27th November 2022

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Date: 27 November 2022

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Good to see you today. And I know Jane has already mentioned this, but I just want to add my thanks to everyone who was involved with yesterday's Christmas fair. Huge amount of work for a lot of people I know, all expertly coordinated by Kay.

Yeah, heartfelt thanks, because it really was a great, great day. And I also want to thank those who've helped get our monster Christmas tree up. I know James was helping put the star on the very top as well, so very kindly done as well.

A lot of decorating going on there. And there's some 600 lights twinkling away on there, don't you know? So very pleased about that and grateful for all the help that's gone into that. As the nights draw in, the winter weaves its way around us.

I know I'm not alone in loving the fact that all sorts of houses, businesses and streets around here are going to be decked with lights that help to brighten the bleakness of a dark December.

I don't know if you think it's too early for Christmas lights and trees. Anyone got their tree up yet?

Oh, there's a smattering. Get in. Two weeks ago, Sian. I like it.

[1 : 02] I like it indeed. I'm all up for that, I think. Although we haven't quite got ours up yet, have we? I'm setting myself up here, because... Anytime, anytime. I do like a little bit of light in the darkness, though, this winter season.

It makes all the difference to our festive feel. And I guess light, when we're talking about Advent, as Jane was saying, we're in this season of Advent. Light really is at the heart of all that Advent is about.

And it'd be good this morning to think about light a bit, because actually all the way through the Bible, light is used as a picture by the writers of what it means to live life God's way.

In fact, light is such a powerful principle for life that it appears in the very first sentence which the Bible records God as saying, famous words at the beginning of Genesis. He says, Let there be light as the creation story kicks into gear.

That's in Genesis 1, verse 3. But interestingly, the opening verses before that, we see why God declares this desire for light.

[2 : 09] And the Genesis 1 opens with these words. 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.

Now how might we define darkness? Well, the dictionary tells us darkness is simply the absence of light. So it's defined by what it isn't rather than what it is.

It's about what it lacks rather than what it has. So darkness, certainly in terms of the way the Bible speaks about it, is therefore a negative thing. Whereas light, that in contrast, is a wholly positive thing.

So for example, if we take the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, you know Isaiah, the prophet with the wonky eyes? Because one is Isaiah, then the other, that one. There's a cracker joke for you.

You remember that one. All right. Here's how he puts these two ideas together, though, of light and darkness. He says this. He says, Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness.

[3 : 21] So darkness is bad. Light is good. Don't get them confused, says Isaiah. Don't mix them up. They're not competing as equals.

No, in fact, they're incompatible. You can't mash up light and darkness. Why is that? Because light always wins. No matter how small an amount of light there is, no amount of darkness can overcome that smallness of any light.

In the same way, though, goodness in this picture will always prevail because ultimately, no amount of evil can ever overcome it. And as we've heard this morning, that's the meaning of hope that comes with Jesus.

And so since throughout the Bible, light is always about goodness. I guess we could say for a start, it's the way God wants our existence to be defined.

He wants us to live a good life in every sense of the word. How do we know what is good? Well, again, this light metaphor helps because light is about illumination.

[4 : 31] Light helps us to see. It makes things known. It reveals what we might say is the truth of our existence. And as the Genesis creation poem and the science which underpins it proves, it's light which enables our very existence in the first place.

We could say light brings about life itself. Now, where? You're probably ahead of me here. Where, or more accurately in whom, do these qualities come together? Yes, top marks to you this morning. They come together in Jesus, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. Daolu, Zhenli, Shenming. No? Oh, I was trying this.

I was trying this. I can do that again just in case. Daolu, Zhenli, Shenming. Yes, got a thumbs up that time. Come on. YouTube is our friend on that one, I tell you.

Okay. So, it's Jesus who defines the way to live. A way which is all about hope, peace, joy, and love is what we're discovering as Advent goes on. Jesus reveals the truth, both the truth about our inability to be perfect, as he is, but also the truth that God's forgiveness and freedom is available to all.

[5 : 47] And Jesus offers us life, life in all its fullness, that full, resurrected, transformed, eternal life. And in fact, Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, and the light that he brings into the world has always been there right from the beginning.

In fact, in his gospel, the writer, John, he uses this theme of light to introduce his whole account of Jesus' life here on earth.

So we're going to hear a reading this morning from the opening verses of John's gospel where you'll see this theme of Jesus and light coming together. his ouerre, Diana!

Byrna! In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made.

[7 : 29] Without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through Him all might believe. He Himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.

He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.

[8 : 54] children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh, and made His dwelling among us.

We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified concerning Him.

He cried out, saying, This is the one I spoke about when I said, He who comes after me has surpassed me, because He was before me. Out of His fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God, and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.

I think it's powerful stuff, you know, this cosmic Christ becomes this beautiful baby, becomes this amazing adult. It's this whole linking of it all, which John tries to convey in the start of his Gospel.

[10 : 20] And it's quite a poetic beginning, so there's a lot in there, but a couple of things that stuck out for me really. He says this, He says, In Him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And then John continues, talking about Jesus' birth on earth. He says, The true light that gives light to everyone was coming

into the world.

And it seems that Jesus Himself, He kind of understands and underlines this reality, when He then, as an adult, says this about Himself. He says, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. All of which kind of all hangs together, hopefully. So far, so good, we might say.

This light stuff is very rightly focused on Jesus. Jesus. But then, interestingly, Jesus takes this idea of Him being light, and invites us in to share that reality with Him.

[11 : 27] Telling us, not just that He is the light of the world, but at one point, He says, You are the light of the world. We are the light of the world. Now, how can this be? How can it be that Jesus is the light of the world, and yet you and I are also the light of the world?

Well, I guess the principle behind it is this idea that the more we allow God's Spirit to influence and shape our lives, the more of God's goodness will shine out of us.

That's a bit like, it's a bit of a cheesy analogy here, but it's a bit like a lighthouse. You and I, the building, if you like, the physical housing of the light. But when we plug into Jesus through the Holy Spirit, it's His light which shines out of us, shining out of our building, our bodies, our lives.

And Jesus Himself, with this lighthouse kind of picture, and a building and so on, He uses a similar, but again, slightly different picture to help His listeners at the time understand how they themselves are to be the light of the world.

So think about it like this, says Jesus. He says, A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house.

[12 : 45] In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. That's where we get that, this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine kind of song from.

And yet when we say those kind of words, when we read this kind of passage, it's not that we let our light shine in some cocky sort of arrogant, look at me kind of way. Nah, it's not actually our light, as we're saying.

It's actually God's light shining through us. And that's why, when people see our good deeds, as Jesus says, it's a point towards God Himself so that people give God the glory and not us.

Jesus says, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds. Now, what might these good deeds be? How do we define good?

Well, what's interesting, I think, is that in the original Greek language that the Gospels were written in, there's actually two different Greek words that are used that we translate into English as good.

[13 : 52] And I've mentioned these before in a different context, so if you're Greek's any good, better than my Cantonese, you may well remember these. But the first word for good is this one, a Greek word, agathos.

Do you want to say with me this morning, one, two, three, agathos. Beautiful. It's where we get the name agatha from. Agatha means good. But in the Greek, there's a specific meaning that this agathos has.

And it means good in terms of quality. So we might say we've got an agathos pair of walking boots or something, you know, an agathos lawnmower or an agathos saucepan, you know.

It's kind of quality, good, well-made stuff, albeit not exactly exciting unless saucepans are your thing. I don't know. That's one word for good though, agathos, good in terms of quality.

But there's a second Greek word for good. It's this one, it's kalos. You want to say with me, one, two, three, kalos. Now, kalos means good but in quite a different way to agathos.

[14 : 55] Kalos means good as in beautiful, as in beautiful. So we might say it's a kalos painting or a kalos view or a kalos showstopper of a cake bake or something.

You know, they're all good but there's beauty in that goodness as well. They're beautifully good.

Now, these two words, agathos and kalos, which one do you think Jesus uses when he's describing our good deeds?

Quality or beautiful? Agathos or kalos? What do you reckon? Kalos. Yeah, it does indeed. It's kalos. Our good deeds, says Jesus, are to be beautifully good.

And so when Jesus says to let our light shine before others, I think it's meant to prompt people to be amazed at the beauty of that goodness coming out of us.

Goodness that goes above and beyond perhaps what they might expect. Goodness which enables people to somehow encounter the goodness, the beauty even, of God himself.

[16:01] And that's quite a challenge to do things beautifully in life, especially when we're knackered after a full day yesterday or whatever. Not just to do good deeds but to do them in such a way that there is real beauty in how they're done.

Beauty which, as I say, which not only captivates people but ultimately points them to something higher, points them to God. And so I guess if we're to be the light of the world because Jesus, the original true light of the world is shining through us, a key question that he's asking is how might we let God's light, God's beautiful light shine before others?

Well, one way that might be helpful for us to think about the kind of light which Jesus has in mind when he tells us to let our light shine could be this because the picture Jesus seems to have in mind when he talks about light is the light which a lamp gives out.

He says, which sits on a stand and gives light to everyone in the house. Now, what kind of lamp has he got in mind? Well, in Jesus' day it would have been one of these, a kind of Roman clay oil lamp. Indeed, one like this. You might have seen this before. It's a little replica Roman oil lamp. Tiny little lamp like that. And in Jesus' day they'd have used olive oil as fuel to put in it and then there's a little wick coming out of the hole which would have drawn up the oil and then you get a nice flame on it.

[17:31] Now, I'm a bit of a pyromaniac. I quite like fire. So, we're going to light this just to show you how it goes. Now, I did tell Nigel one of our wardens we're going to use some fuel today.

So, the risk assessment is live before your eyes. Okay. So, let's get this in there. How much do we have? About that much? A bit more. Good one.

Okay. Let's see how we do with this. Oh, it stinks as well. Thank you. Yeah. Let's see if this, see if this works. Yeah.

Yeah. That's very quick. And quite a flame. Better than a candle, I think. It really is quite a flame there. And I put quite a lot of oil in there by accident, really.

So, should we see how long we leave that or should we blow it out? What do you reckon? Think about the fire alarms. Should we have a go and blow it? Leave it? Blow it? Leave it. Ian's in charge.

[18:31] All right. On your head be it. We'll see how wild it goes. But as you can see, even if you had one little lamp like that in a room, actually, it would give a huge amount of light.

Giving off the warmest of glows. In the same way as that lamp, says Jesus, we're to let our light shine before others.

And so, what might the fact that it's a naked flame, like this kind of lamp light that Jesus has in mind, tell us about what it means to let our light shine? Well, we could take all sorts of angles on this this morning, but the one I want to focus on, I guess, is the kind of light this gives out.

You see, as with any flame, as with candle lights, lamp light is pretty gentle. It's a very soft, ambient kind of light. It's a forgiving light.

It brings out the best in us. I guess that's why having a candlelit dinner is often risky on a first date because you think, hello, but actually, the next day, maybe not when the sun's out.

[19:36] Who knows? Who knows? I'm not saying that was my experience at all, so don't quote me on that one. But if it's lamp light that Jesus has in mind, which it would have been because of his time, it strikes me that letting our light shine before others means doing so in a way which brings out the best in them, which emphasises, above all, the warmth and the welcome and the generosity and the gentleness and the grace of God.

See, letting our light shine, I don't think, is about a big spotlight, a kind of interrogation light that Jesus wants to shine on people to make them feel awkward. Nah. It's about allowing our lives to illuminate others.

They may see something of God, as we were saying, in the kalos, the beautifully good deeds that we're able to do with God's help. And so, with that kind of light in mind, what might these beautifully good deeds be?

What might they look like? Well, I think we saw them yesterday, if I'm honest. I think we saw the beautifully good deeds being done at our Christmas fair. I mean, what a team.

This was the team who were helping to set things up in the morning. 60, 70 people. That's a cracking team for any event, but for the Christmas fair in particular. It was such a good day yesterday. The kindness and the willingness to serve.

[20 : 53] I heard numerous people comment to me during the day how warm and welcoming and generally how feel-good and uplifting they found the day. And that is credit to you. Credit to you.

Credit to the way I know that you know that the best way to share God's love is simply by living it. No hard sell, no interrogation, no spotlight on people, but a gentle, inviting light that brings out the best in people.

And we hope opens them up to the good possibilities of what life with the source of all light can be like. Equally though, I know for me being part of this church, it gives me confidence as vicar, I suppose, because I know that not only are you praying for me with that same gentle warmth that you offer to others, but when I'm not with you, I have the privilege, I guess, of sort of representing St. John's name out there.

Sort of our collective light, if you like, sort of channeling that in my role. And this was really brought home to me last weekend, when on the Friday of last week, you may remember me saying we had a wedding, and I had the privilege of taking the wedding here of Ash and Nikki, who were the landlords at the Vic down the road.

And they wanted me to marry them in a hotel initially, that was the initial plan, but I'm not licensed to marry people in hotels, only in churches. So we worked out basically if they got a church wedding on the Friday, that was the legal stuff, I could go up and marry them in the hotel on a Sunday in a non-legal ceremony, and it was all dresses and best men and all that kind of thing in a hotel, but the legals were done in church, and then I would do the hotel kind of civil ceremony as well.

[22 : 43] So last Friday lunchtime here in church, I led Ash and Nikki through what was a very simple, gentle service together. Maybe there were 15 people, I think, President Marg was here with us, helping us out.

But it was just the closest friends and family, no bells and whistles, no razzmatazz to the wedding. You can see what Ash is wearing, it was very dressed down, do you know what I mean? All very relaxed and informal.

But actually, an informality suited me, I tell you, I like informality, but actually I think it was the informality which helped to make it such a special, moving time.

And I know for me, when I was stood here, when they were getting married there, I felt the sort of tangible presence of God with us. For example, I love pronouncing a blessing on a couple at a wedding, that's the best bit for me once they're married.

The first thing you do is pray a prayer of blessing over them. And there was just a little pause at that moment I felt. All eyes on me and Ash and Nikki at the front and you're saying words and you could tell there was a little moment of, oh, this is special here, there's something different going on here and obviously, we know that's God's peace resting on us.

[23 : 59] But afterwards, one of the guys who was there, one of the regulars from the Vic, who I don't really know very well, but he's a good friend of Ash and Nikki's, but he's in no way a churchgoer and he came up to me at the end and he was, and he's a gruff geezer, but he was visibly quite moved and he said at the end of our conversation after the wedding, he said, you know, fair play, I'm not religious, but you make church credible, he said.

And it's an interesting word for someone who wouldn't call themselves a Christian to use about church, credible. Because credible means it's believable, it's convincing.

Now what made that service credible or believable, we might say, enlightening to him? Well, whilst it's obviously an encouraging thing for me to hear, I know that any credibility with this God stuff has actually got nothing to do with me, it's not about me being credible.

Instead, what I'd say this guy was expressing in his own way was that in that service, in this church, in this building, in some mysterious way, which, you know, the building's special in some ways, infused with God's presence in a unique way.

He'd experienced, I would say, something of the profound peace of God in those little moments. You know, God's kindness, if you like, God's gentleness was what gave things credibility, I would say.

[25 : 25] Now, something about that service, something about being here, felt genuine, felt gentle for him, felt believable, perhaps for the first time. Now, I don't know the journey this guy's on, like I said, I don't know him very well.

I had some good chats with him over the weekend and we shared a pint over the football on Friday and the Vicar as well, that made it a good night, the football was rotten, but the pint was nice. And it

was really good yesterday to see Ash and Nicky pop into our Christmas fair as well yesterday. And I know increasingly for them, certainly through the Burma Be A Friend stuff we were involved with, through the wedding, even yesterday, they increasingly feel in their own way that this is their church as much as it is ours.

And we'll see what God continues to do as time goes on, I'm sure. But I think what I want to say this morning is with yesterday's fair, with all the Christmas stuff we've got planned coming up, there'll be hundreds of people coming through our doors this December.

We've got a New Year's Eve party coming up where over half of those who've already bought tickets are from our wider community. It's not church people so much, it's the majority. Now, combine that stuff, we've had, what, 46 people, I think, at the Monday service that Ron and Kathy were leading on Monday, which is fantastic.

[26 : 38] Drop-ins booming, so much we need more people to join the teams. We've got little friends at capacity, pub club is always a good night, there's F&F; going well. I think I just want to say this morning, there's no challenge, it's just an encouragement, really, because I want to say how grateful I am for you and how grateful I am to God for all that he's doing in our collective life at the moment because it feels, as we enter this season of Advent, it feels like all the disruption of COVID, and I know there's still bits going on, but it feels like we're getting back to being the community church that we long to be.

We've got our mojo, I feel like, I know I've seen you every week, I'm a bit, I feel I've got my mojo back a little bit and the community side of church life, that really helps for me.

So all I want to say this morning really is please be encouraged because you're doing great, you're doing great, and I'm privileged to be representing us in what I do. Couldn't be prouder to be part of this church.

And, oh, blow my neck, yeah. Come on. Oh, no, come on.

All right. But, it's hard with glasses when you're going to do it. Best of all though, and I want to finish with this, when God gives us the privilege and the opportunity of being able to shine with his light, to offer ourselves to him with the good deeds that he enables us to do, well, that's when I think we get glimpses of God's glory in our midst.

[28 : 24] That's what captivates us. That's the beauty of God. It's a glory that I know we pray will be both contagious and credible for all who we encounter and we offer God's light to this Christmas.

That'll do for me. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.