

# Sunday 13th October 2024 - This Little Light Of Mine: Things Aren't What They Used To Be.

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] Morning everyone. Morning. Good to see some newer faces here among us. So if you don't know me, my name is Matt, the vicar here, leading us through this little series today that we've been doing called This Little Light of Mine, in which we're exploring what it means to let our light shine before others so that they may see the light and the love of God through us.

And I'd like us this morning, if it's okay, to think about the impact that looking back and looking forwards has on the way we might be and share the good news of God. So looking back and looking forward. And we'll unpack this as we go, but I think it's fair to start, that one of the most popular, enjoyable, and probably socially bonding things we can do is to share memories of times gone by with each other, to reminisce about the past. And that shared experience can be anything from remembering perhaps the sweets and the chocolates we used to enjoy from yesteryear, toffos and trios and Texans in particular would be my picados bunch, all sadly unavailable now these days it seems. That might trigger some memories for you of younger years gone by. Alternatively, you might be into the TV shows of yesteryear as well. So for me growing up in the 80s, this was my kind of stuff that I was watching. So my favourite shows I guess would have included Grandstand,

Going Live, EastEnders, Neighbours, Beatles About, A Question of Sport, Cheers, Roseanne, Family Fortunes, The Two Ronnies, The A-Team, Bob's Full House, Only Fools and Horses, Blackadder, The Wonder Years, Red Dwarf, Night Rider, Wheel of Fortune, Blockbusters, Grange Hill, Dallas, Happy Days, The Cosby Show, Bullseye, Doctor Who, Alf and Teleaddicts. I did watch a lot of TV. What many of us also enjoy about recalling the way things used to be, and I'm not from originally from around these parts, but what I really love hearing about is the stories from folks and imagining what life was like here in years gone by. So you may recall times perhaps at the cinema on Sankey's Corner. Yeah, a few nods of recognition with that. I won't ask what went on in the cinema, but you know, that's a, you might recognise that. Equally, there was the Hollygrove Club. Maybe many happy nights were spent for you there over the years. Or then looking much further back, and this is obviously way before any of our times. I love looking back at really old photos of Chase Terrace. For example, this scene here, which is of the road that we're currently on, looking up the high street back in the day, with, you can just about see, I think, the old St. John's building there tucked away on the left there. It's a reminder, I guess, these kind of photos, especially seeing the old St. John's building there that people have been worshipping years now, and perhaps recalling the past is often an encouragement for us in the present. Indeed, in the Bible, you know, remembering the past is often championed as a helpful and as a good thing to do, mainly it seems because it's a reminder of God's faithfulness to us. So you get passages like this in Psalm 77. It says this,

I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your deeds. It's this idea, it seems, of remembering our roots in order to persevere in the present and hopefully to flourish in the future. What's more, it seems, a lot of the whole Bible story as a whole, well, it revolves around people celebrating God's faithfulness by commemorating certain seasons or events. You know, festivals like Passover and Pentecost, we're told about in the Bible. Festivals for us would be like Christmas and Easter. You know, they're all rooted in a desire to recall and remember what God has done in order to be reassured and refreshed going forward. That's the positives, I guess, about looking back at things. And yet, what's noticeable, I think, is that there are also various times in the Bible when looking back is positively discouraged. Indeed, one of these comes from Jesus himself in a passage from Luke's

Gospel. And it's a passage which we'll look at in a moment, but it's one which on the surface, at least, I think seems to be one of the more difficult, even disconcerting little blocks of teaching that Jesus is recorded as giving. So we'll have a watch of it and see what you make of this.

[ 5 : 05 ] This is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 9, verses 57 to 62. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go.

Jesus replied, Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. He said to another man, follow me. But he replied, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Still another said, I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family. Jesus replied, no one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. Now, at first glance, first hearing of that, it might seem like Jesus treats some of those who approach him somewhat harshly, should we say? Here there seems to be a sort of lack of sympathy, perhaps, empathy in some of his words here.

But I think if we look again at each of these three little mini conversations that Jesus has, I think we'll see instead that it's really just Jesus' way of underlining the reality of what it truly means to follow him.

[ 6 : 55 ] So if we go through one at a time, first up, this one, the first man comes up and says to him, I will follow you wherever you go. But Jesus replies, Foxes have dens and birds have nests.

But the son of man, you know, referring to himself, has no place to lay his head. So why does Jesus respond to this guy in this way?

Well, it seems here that Jesus is saying to this bloke, look, you say you'll follow me wherever. And that's good to hear. But I need to ask you, have you really considered what you're saying there? Have you really considered what that might mean? You know, I can't promise you a comfortable or an easy life. Far from it. You know, if you're up for it, great.

And it'll be the best decision you'll ever make. But I want you to be prepared. Because I'm going to challenge you in all sorts of ways.

[ 7 : 59 ] Now, we're not told if this guy does indeed end up following Jesus. You know, the clip seems to suggest not as he kind of walks away a little bit. But we don't know.

The Bible doesn't tell us. What we do know is that in the next verse, Jesus then goes on to another man. Follow me, he says. He invites him to follow him.

But this guy replies, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Now, what's going on here? Well, we know from Jesus' time that when someone died, there was an obligation to bury the body as soon as possible.

You know, to place the dead body in a tomb. So it's unlikely that this guy is wandering around town in the hours after his dad has just died.

No, he'd be too focused on burying the actual body. Instead, the burial that this guy seems to be referring to is probably what usually happened years after the death of a loved one.

[ 9 : 08 ] You see, the custom when someone died was to initially place their body in a tomb. What then happened was that years later, once, to be blunt, once decomposition had happened, the bones would then be collected from this temporary resting place.

They'd be placed in a smaller stone coffin called an ossuary, like these ones here. And then the ossuary, this box about that big by that big, that would then be buried alongside other ossuaries in these kind of niches here in a shared, permanent resting place, a shared tomb.

And so knowing that's the custom, I think it's likely that when this guy says, Lord, let me first go and bury my father, he's talking about the ossuary, this mini coffin of bones.

It's the equivalent, perhaps, of us keeping a loved one's ashes in an urn for years because we can't quite face scattering them. That's why I think Jesus says, and I'm sure he does it with real compassion in his eyes.

He says, look, let the dead bury their own dead. In other words, let him go. Let him go. But you, you start living.

[ 10 : 38 ] You go and proclaim the kingdom of God. You know, that's what it means to truly follow me. But then a third man comes to Jesus and says, I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.

And it's here that Jesus responds with these words. He says, no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

Now, in terms of this guy's request, you know, I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.

I don't think Jesus would have any problem at all with this guy wanting to say goodbye to his family in order to follow Jesus. I mean, how could Jesus have a problem with that?

That's the kind, loving, responsible thing to do. Now, rather, I think here is the fact that this guy says, I will follow you, Lord, but, but.

[ 11 : 46 ] And really, it wouldn't matter what he said because the but reveals that he doesn't actually fully trust Jesus.

After all, Jesus makes it clear elsewhere that everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

I mean, just as an aside, you know, that, these words of Jesus, that's certainly been my experience in my, albeit pretty flawed attempts to follow Jesus and seek first his kingdom.

For example, when Gemma and I first moved here, what was that, 13 years ago now for me to do this job, we knew it would mean living nowhere near our families.

You know, they live in the north and they live in the south and then obviously we're here in the Midlands. But would we swap you, our church family, if you like, to live nearer to our blood family?

[ 13 : 01 ] Well, no, no, we wouldn't. Because being part of this community, it continues to be a way in which I'd say we experience the blessing and the faithful provision of God for us.

And whilst we're grateful that our two kids, Heidi and Bobby, still have all four of their blood grandparents in their lives, we also know how much they, as kids and we, as parents, appreciate them having you, you know, a hundred more spiritual grandparents and aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters, you know, without whom our lives would be so much poorer.

Jesus says, seek first the kingdom of God and all these things, I'd suggest family, community, support, love will be given to you as well.

But if we go back to the passage, I think what's really interesting is that Jesus concludes these conversations about what it means to truly follow him with these words.

When he says, no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. Now, what does he mean there?

[ 14 : 26 ] Well, on a practical level, there's no doubt Jesus is aware that if you plow a field, like if you, you know, mow the grass or you drive a car or something, if you look behind you as you go, you're pretty shafted really.

You're going to veer all over the place in whatever direction you were hoping to go. You're never going to hit the straight lines that you wanted to. But Jesus uses this, I think, to illustrate that as far as building the kingdom and doing life, God's way is concerned.

There's a need to concentrate on looking forward in life and not looking back to where we've come from.

That forward focus is how we'll best serve God. Now, why, though, might Jesus leave this thing till last?

Why might he conclude all these conversations about what it means to follow him by warning against looking back? Well, I think Jesus knows how detrimental being nostalgic for the past can be for our ability to follow him and share God's light and God's love with others in the here and now.

[ 15 : 37 ] Now, why might nostalgia be a problem? Well, I think more than just remembering or even celebrating the past, which are good things to do.

Nostalgia involves a longing for the past. You know, when times perhaps were simpler or better, a longing, if you like, for the good old days.

Trouble is, nostalgia is often based in a longing for a past that never actually existed. Instead, I'd say it's a rose-tinted, oversimplified, kind of selective memory of the best bits of times gone by.

It's a cherry-picking that our brains automatically do in order to protect us, perhaps, from dwelling on difficult or painful memories. In favour of ones that instead bring us happiness and joy.

I mean, it's like those people who say, ah, school days, the best days of your life. When in reality, for many of us, they were pretty miserable, really.

[ 16 : 50 ] And I'm not just talking about the teachers. Yes, there would have been good times, you know, fond memories of things, perhaps friendships, perhaps teachers who made a big difference to us. And I don't know what each of our school days were like, but unless your school days were

completely different to mine, they were tough.

They were tough days, you know, and included times, for me certainly, of bullying and insecurity and pressure and loneliness and a lot of boredom as well. They weren't the best days of my life. And if they really were, what a depressing adulthood that would have been, really. Or again, take the 1980s. You know, we mentioned the TV shows earlier. In many ways, the 1980s, that's the decade I grew up in.

It's a great decade for so much great music and film and sport and technology and so on. So much to celebrate and look back with fondness. But the 80s, also a decade characterized by apartheid and HIV AIDS and the ozone layer and urban riots and the miners' strike and Hillsborough and Hysel and Lockerbie and Chernobyl and the poll tax and the fear of nuclear war.

You know, all of which nostalgia for the 80s, all this I love the 80s stuff. They don't mention all that kind of stuff. You know, nostalgia almost kind of whispers to us, you know, do you remember when life was simpler?

[18:13] But life was never truly simple. It's just that our memories have filtered out the complexities. As I say, there are positives to nostalgia.

You know, it protects us from dwelling on the painful things in the past. And it can bond us with others through the joy of shared memories. There are good things about nostalgia.

But I think when faced in our present lives with struggles or difficulties, nostalgia has a tendency to compare today's worst with yesterday's best.

Meaning that the past will always seem preferable to the present. And yet that, says Jesus, that's no good if we're to be of service in building the kingdom of God.

No good if we're to share the good news of God's love with those we live alongside today. Now, why might this be? Well, let's look at a couple of examples, perhaps.

[19:22] So if we look at the first words of a psalm, Psalm 96, starts with these words. It says, sing to the Lord a new song. A call which is echoed across various other passages in the Bible.

It's an encouragement to find new ways to give God glory, new ways to celebrate, new ways to communicate the good news of God's love. And that's why, you know, we try to introduce new songs, just someone, to our song worship here at St. John's.

Because in amongst, you know, some classic hymns and songs, we're told to sing a new song to the Lord. It's important to sort of encounter God in a new way in praise.

Now, you might think each of us got our own personal opinions on the set list of the songs that we do. You might think we don't quite do enough older songs. Maybe you'd prefer us to become a kind of greatest hits radio kind of church, you know, playing the songs from the 70s, 80s and 90s.

But I think there are enough of those churches around, perhaps. Instead, the priority of singing a new song, it's a broader principle than just the music.

[20:36] It's a principle which I'd say is worth applying across the board. Not only with how we offer our worship, but how we structure our church life in general. Indeed, Jesus taught on another occasion about the importance of not putting new wine in old wineskins.

Because as the new wine kind of develops and matures, the old wineskins would crack. That'd be unable to contain the new thing, if you like, that God is wanting to do.

Instead, the new wine of the kingdom of God. That needs new wineskins to accommodate it. And so it is, I'd say, with church.

I'd say we need, therefore, to keep aware of what the new wineskins for our church life together might be. That could be anything from the buildings we meet in, the language we use, the style of leadership we adopt, the activities we offer, the technology we use, the teachings we explore, the beliefs we wrestle with, the refreshments we offer.

Because if our buildings, our language, our activities and so on, if they're not fit for the present purpose, then we're going to crack like an old wineskin and be unable to enjoy the new wine that I'm convinced God wants us to experience.

[22:01] For example, here's a graph. I know some of you love graphs. Here's a graph which outlines the attendance figures at Sunday church services in the whole of the Diocese of Litchfield since the year 2000.

And Litchfield Diocese stretches from Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury, from Litchfield up to Stoke. Different colours in the graph, they represent different areas. But it's a picture of Sunday attendance in services of almost continuous decline.

You know, there's a gap, those last little white gaps there. That's COVID at the end there when stats weren't taken, obviously, because buildings were shut. But despite a little rise last year, the trajectory of decline is pretty shocking, really.

Going from, what, 32,000 or something in 2000 down to maybe 17,000 last year. That's a huge decline in a relatively short space of time.

Now, from what I see and what I hear, I'd suggest that this overall decline can largely be attributed to a reticence in too many churches to be willing to leave the past behind and welcome change.

[ 23 : 24 ] You know, to look forward to the new things God might be calling us to embrace.

Conversely, here's our figures for the last 15 years, which is as far back as I've got numbers for.

It's a graph showing our Sunday attendance since 2009. The green bits is adults, the blue is children and young people. Again, there's a gap on the right for COVID.

But generally, it's a different picture which kind of bucks the local trend. Now, pointing this out, it's not at all to be smug or think we've got it sussed here.

You know, that is so far from the truth, so far. And of course, Sunday attendance is anything but a full picture of what we're about as a church.

But I put this up really simply to illustrate through one measurement. You know, in this instance, Sunday numbers. That decline is not inevitable.

[ 24 : 30 ] That church doesn't need to be an old, cracked wineskin. Rather, I'd suggest this is perhaps evidence that trying to embrace change, trying to be fit for purpose, choosing to sing a new song, and generally trying to look forwards, not back.

Well, I'd say these are ways in which we're able to let our light shine so that others may see our good deeds and give glory to our Heavenly Father. And if it feels like you're moving forward as a community, then people are more likely to be inclined to join you on that journey.

It's one example of the importance perhaps of looking forward, not back. But secondly, and more profoundly perhaps, is the way in which I think nostalgia can sometimes cause us to fall out of love with the world, and ultimately, if we're not careful, to fall out of love a little bit with God.

I understand why nostalgia is such a tempting place to dwell, especially if we feel shaken or confused or threatened with the pace at which the world seems to be changing.

So much of what we thought we knew, or what we've been taught in the past by people we respected, that's being challenged almost on a weekly basis.

[ 26 : 02 ] So much of that challenge happens that sometimes we just want to retreat into that simplicity that Ian was talking about the other week, those simpler times when all seemed well with the world.

I do understand that desire. And yet, as the poet Dante, I think so poignantly wrote, what I think I'm learning is that the antidote to misery, the way by which our faith can remain alive, and the way by which our love for God, and our love for the world that God loves can grow, is to embrace the present moment with God.

Now, what might that mean? Well, for me, I think it means keeping alert and remaining open to the ways in which God is at work.

You know, being expectant that even in the midst of so much in our lives, which may feel confusing or troubling, there is so much joy and so much hope to be found in the new approaches, the new thoughts, the new experiences on offer to us.

What's more, whilst nostalgia and perhaps idealizing the past, that can, if we're not careful, both alienate new people and it can hinder growth.

[ 27 : 42 ] Embracing the present means being excited about change, excited about new people, new ideas, new possibilities, and perhaps most of all, excited at what God might be wanting to teach and bring out of us through them.

As God says through the prophet Isaiah, he says, forget the former things. Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing.

Now it springs up. Do you not perceive it? I wonder for you what former things you might need to forget, what approaches, what beliefs, what priorities, what teaching God might be calling you to leave behind.

I wonder what nostalgia God might be calling you to stop dwelling in. But equally, more positively, I wonder what new things might be springing up that God is wanting to reveal to you and to me today.

You know, we see through Jesus that God loves the world, not just as it was or as it will be, but as it is.

[ 29 : 13 ] If we consistently feel that the glory days are behind us, I think we're unlikely to be people who can shine in the ways that bring glory to God and what God is doing in the present.

Whereas if we can do as Jesus says, if we can look forward and trust that Jesus will be both our companion and our guide, then who knows what wonder, what surprises, what new things we might see and what light we might let shine that brings glory to our heavenly Father.

Amen.