

The light of the world

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[0 : 00] What is the darkest place you've ever been? Perhaps you remember a time being in a very dark forest, or in the countryside, away from any electric lights. That was a picture of a very dark forest. It's so dark you can't even see.

Or you were in a very dark cave and everyone turns their headlamps off. Or if you were at home and there was a power cut or something like that. Where's the darkest place you've ever been? In our electrical age, we take light very much for granted.

It's not often I walk somewhere without street lamps. Wherever we drive, we have headlights.

Within a couple of taps, I can turn a torch on my phone wherever I go.

We have light everywhere. But when we're properly without light, the darkness can be really scary. When it's totally pitch black, we feel alone. Little children are afraid of the dark.

And even if we've forgotten what it's like to be afraid of the dark, we know that in the dark we can feel lost and anxious and vulnerable. Did you know that in the darker months, in the winter time of year, rates of low mood and poor mental health are much higher?

[1 : 18] And our fear of violent crime is higher in the dark winter months. And so, in comparison, the light is brilliant. Light is happier. It's safe. It's life-giving.

I've never met somebody who wanted to go on holiday to the Arctic in the middle of winter, where it's dark for 24 hours a day. But we all quite like to go on holiday to somewhere like Spain, where it's sunny.

We love the light. We associate light with good things. And Jesus says so iconically, so clearly, in verse 12 of today's passage, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. That's our first point. Jesus says, I am the light of the world.

If you were here in church last week, perhaps you remember we had two tents at the front. That's because where we've got to in John's Gospel, the people in Jerusalem are celebrating the Festival of Tabernacles.

[2 : 19] It was a big celebration where everyone lived in tents for a few days, because they were remembering how they travelled through the wilderness in tents from Egypt to Israel. God freed the people from slavery in Egypt and brought them across the desert to the land he'd promised them.

But in the middle, in that desert wilderness, they were far from home. It was dry and dark and deadly. But through the wilderness, God cared for his people.

He gave them everything they needed, which included water, which connects with last week when Jesus offered the people living water. But also in the desert, God gave them light as he appeared as a great pillar of cloud and fire.

The people had everything they needed, water and fire, water and light, a bit like a plant. And this ancient story of God guiding his people in a pillar of fiery light would have been on everyone's mind at the Festival of Tabernacles, because that's what they were remembering and celebrating.

And so it would be good if it was on our minds too. So pick up your Bible and turn with me to page 71. And we'll just read a couple of verses. Exodus chapter 13, page 71.

[3 : 43] Exodus 13, and I'll read from verse 20. After leaving Succoth, a place in Egypt, they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert.

By day, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so they could travel by day or night.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. As God's people go into the wilderness, it would have been scary.

They'd left their homes and all that they'd known for several generations because it wasn't safe anymore. But now they have to travel into and across the dark wilderness. But you can imagine how significant it would have been for them to know that they have this pillar of fiery light guiding them.

It showed them that God was with them and that he was guiding his people. And all this was in the minds of people as they were celebrating the festival of tabernacles in Jerusalem. So when Jesus stands up and proclaims to the people, I am the light of the world.

[4 : 53] This would have been playing in their minds somewhat. But Jesus words, it's such a big claim. It's such a wonderful claim. If it's true, it's amazing. The question is, is it true?

We remember this extra story in which the Lord God came to be present in the pillar of fire. He was with his people. He guided his people.

He made sure that they never got lost in the darkness. Think how good it would be to never be in darkness, but instead have Jesus with you, guiding you through life and into eternal life.

It would be so wonderful to have Jesus as your light, just like the Lord God was the guiding and present light for Israel. At the festival of tabernacles in Jerusalem that we remembered last week, they had festival lights in the city.

This would have been a big flaming lamp on a tall pole in the city. So it would be a little bit like, maybe imagine, some Christmas lights on people's houses.

[6 : 01] When people put Christmas lights up, they're jolly and happy and they make the city feel like a friendlier place. Jesus promises to not just be the light of Jerusalem, but the light of the whole world.

If you're ever afraid of the dark, as we might be in the bleak midwinter, even if we have nice winter sun today, we can imagine what that's like. Instead, when we see Christmas lights up, we remember that light brings joy and some peace.

Notice that Jesus says in verse 12, he is the light and the light for the world. The point being, there is no alternative. Nothing compares to the light that Jesus brings.

And Jesus is the light for all people, for the whole world. Not just for Israelite people coming out of Egypt 4,000 years ago. Jesus is the light for every country and every person.

For each of us today, Jesus' words in verse 12 are ones worth remembering. They're so wonderful. His promise is incredible. That if we follow him, we will never walk in darkness.

[7 : 09] We'll never be alone. He'll be with us. He'll guide us. On the darkest day, even into eternal life. Jesus will be the light for the world. Jesus will be the light for us.

But can Jesus make this massive claim? And is the world really in that much darkness? Well, our second section, verse 13 to 20. Without light, the world is dark.

When Jesus stands up and proclaims these words, not everyone likes it. And perhaps you look back in John chapter 7, verse 43. The people were divided because of Jesus.

And the religious leaders want to seize him. And now Jesus has made another claim. So the Pharisees in verse 13 respond skeptically. They don't like it. And when someone makes a massive claim, we'd like to see evidence for it.

And perhaps at school in your history lessons, you're taught that you need a good source for any facts that you say. Or perhaps when we see on TV a toothpaste advert.

[8 : 15] And it says something like, 9 out of 10 dentists recommend this brand of toothpaste. We can believe that. That seems like a reliable source, even if we'd want a bit more information perhaps. But if the toothpaste advert said, 100% of people who tried this said it was the best toothpaste they've ever had.

It was the best experience they'd ever have. They now prefer brushing their teeth to eating chocolate. We'd think, I really want to see a good source for that. Or perhaps in your history essay. You wrote that between 40 and 50 AD, aliens ruled the Roman Empire. Your history teacher would want a good source for that. Well, we'll see in John chapter 8, that there is evidence that Jesus is reliable in what he says.

And that the world really is as dark of a place as he says it is. And as I said, the Pharisees don't like Jesus' big claim. They confront him face to face and ask for a source. Look at verse 13.

Here you are, appearing as your own witness. Your testimony is not valid. It's like someone wrote that aliens ruled the Roman Empire.

[9 : 23] And your history teacher asks, what's your evidence for that? What's your source? And you just say, I just know it. I'm the source of information. You're your own witness.

We'd think that wasn't very reliable. And the Pharisees are claiming Jesus is like that. You can't just say, I know it. I'm my own witness. But Jesus says it's not quite like that.

Because he is reliable. Look down. He says, I know where I came from and where I'm going. Jesus really knows what he's talking about. He knows his origin and his destination.

He's a reliable witness. And he's not the only witness. Verse 16. My decisions are true because I'm not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me.

In your own law, it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. Jesus is saying, I agree. It's good to have another source backing up your claims. He says, I am one who testifies for myself.

[10 : 22] My other witness is the Father who sent me. Jesus has another witness to his great big claim. God the Father. Now, if you say that God the Father is on your side, that is pretty good evidence for something.

The Pharisees are probably not going to win this argument. And actually, if we think back in John's Gospel, we have other witnesses that back up Jesus' claim.

John the Baptist was a witness to Jesus in chapter one, validating who he is. Jesus said in chapter five that the Old Testament scriptures are a witness to him.

The Samaritan woman in chapter four, in a sense, is a witness telling her story about Jesus and how he was this supernatural man. And all the miracles that we've read about in John's Gospel so far show that he really is who he said he is.

Jesus healed an official son. He healed a disabled man. He fed 5,000 people. Those things all happened in public. And if we're reading carefully, we get to see the private things too.

[11 : 28] Jesus turned water into wine. And Jesus walked on water. There are all these validating witnesses in John's Gospel. And John's Gospel itself, which bears witness to us, saying that Jesus really is who he said he is.

Jesus really is trustworthy for you to believe in. Jesus is reliable. And yet the Pharisees do not want to believe it. They are adamant he can't be right.

They don't get it. They don't get him. They don't want him. They'd much rather he just shut up and turned his light off. And perhaps we like to think of ourselves as very enlightened people.

And we have science and technology and art. We have great progress. We have so much understanding. We live in an age and a city that prizes education.

Do we really need a light of the world? Can't scientific human progress just do everything for us? But for all of our impressive progress, there is still much darkness in the world.

[12 : 31] I think it doesn't take too long for us to think about it to remember that. Modern groundbreaking technologies like drones or nuclear weapons or social media don't bring about world peace.

They just bring up the stakes for potential darkness. These things can't actually bring peace or light. They can't change the human heart. If we're selfish and mean, we're still selfish and mean.

Now we just have bigger bombs. We do actually need a light of the world. Or what about humans just figuring it out for themselves? Why can't we just let people do whatever they want?

But while that might sound like a positive idea, it's chaotic and harmful in reality. We all have different desires. We all think we know the light way, the right way.

We really need a light of the world. And what about other spiritualities? And crystals and manifestation, manifesting, sorry, and meditations are all very popular.

[13 : 33] But Jesus would say, those things can't actually bring real light. They can't tell you anything about the universe. They can't guide you into eternal life. Jesus knows where he came from and where he's going.

Crystals don't. Other forms of spirituality might feel significant. But they're not Jesus. We really need a light of the world. For our world is dark.

And the Pharisees actually show this very clearly. They are so prejudiced against Jesus. And they just really have no idea what he's talking about. Do you see in verse 19, they don't even understand that the father he's talking about is God.

Verse 19. Where is your father? You do not know me or my father, Jesus replied. If you knew me, you would know my father also. If they've not understood Jesus correctly, they've not understood God correctly.

And that would be scary news for the religious leaders of the day. But the Pharisees don't like Jesus. And they don't really know how in the dark they just are. See, without light, the world is dark. [14:40] And in verse 20, John, who writes the gospel, gives us a little clue as to where this is going. Verse 20. Verse 20. Jesus spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put.

Yet no one seized him because his hour had not yet come. We get this little reminder of where the showdown between light and darkness is headed.

When the hour comes, the religious leaders will try to turn off the light of the world. The only reason they haven't done so yet is that the hour has not yet come.

And that's what we would like to do too, right? If we don't like a light, we turn it off. To the light that shows how in the dark the Pharisees really are.

To the light that shows the darkness that's in their hearts. They just want to turn it off. Without light, the world is in darkness. See for us, we might find being in the dark scary sometimes.

[15:43] But sometimes we might find being in the dark quite appealing. If we want to hide away what we're doing, if we want to hide the darkness of our hearts, we'd much rather darkness than light.

And perhaps like the Pharisees, we'd rather any exposing light stays far away. We don't want Jesus showing up as the light of the world. We'd rather things stay dark and hidden.

Without light, the world is in darkness. But thirdly and finally, we see that only Jesus can bring light. Somewhere there.

Do you ever have one of those moments where you're doing something and you just realise all of a sudden you're going in completely the wrong direction? I remember one time a few years ago, I was baking some cherry scones with my mum and I got two of the ingredients mixed up.

I can't remember exactly what. But you can imagine you're baking a cake and you get the sugar and salt mixed up. And for one moment you're totally confident doing your own thing. And the next you cringe and you feel like such an idiot.

[16:46] What have I done? It's like you walk into a brick wall or something. Or you're confidently driving somewhere and you suddenly realise you're going completely the wrong way. It's so embarrassing and annoying.

And when you've been confidently wrong about something and suddenly get confronted with the truth, you have two options. You can carry on in error or admit that you're wrong and turn around. When Jesus comes as the light to a dark world, we have two options.

Carry on confidently in the darkness in our own direction or admit that we're lost and go with him.

And in these verses, at 21 to 30, we really see clearly the distinction between Jesus and who he's talking to.

Verse 23, just over the page, Jesus says, You are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world.

Or twice in verse 21 and then again in 24, Jesus says that the state of the world in darkness is very serious. You will die in your sin. When we're in darkness, we really can't find a way out.

[17:56] Imagine a boat lost at sea. Again, it's very dark. The illustration doesn't really work that well. Imagine a boat lost at sea in the pitch black. There's no power, no lights, a cloudy storm, so there's not even the stars of the sky.

A boat lost at sea in the darkness is in great trouble. It's only when a light from a rescue light boat shines that something from outside the boat shines that we might have any hope of finding our way home.

Or perhaps you might know the old movie now, The Matrix. In it, humankind is trapped in a simulation where they have no idea that what they're experiencing isn't the real world.

And from inside, you have no idea that you're so lost and doomed. It's only when, in The Matrix, Morpheus offers you the red pill that you have any way of getting out.

The problem is, when you're in the darkness, you have no idea just how lost you are. It takes a bright light from the outside, something to interrupt you, to guide you out.

[19:02] Jesus is the light of the world. He's the only one who can help. And the question is, between those two options, will we carry on our own way in the darkness?

Or will we turn around and decide to follow him? Emma and I really love watching Call the Midwife. I think it's such lovely and wholesome television.

It's about nuns and midwives who help pregnant women and their families in the East End of London. And the midwives in it are excellent. They're kind, loyal, hardworking and capable. They have the equipment, the connections and the experience that they need. If someone is in a difficult situation and call the midwife, the midwives can help. But almost every episode, a patient who needs their help is incredibly reluctant to receive it. They might need financial help or childcare, but it can be embarrassing to admit that you need help. And perhaps, particularly, if I'm trying to prove myself, I won't accept help from others. [20 : 09] And that can be a danger whether we're at the top or the bottom of the social ladder. And part of the warning of this part of John's Gospel is that those who are most confident in themselves are the ones who are actually most blind.

We're so in the darkness and we love the darkness that we're liable to refuse any help to get us out of the darkness. But here's the thing as I round up.

Jesus being the light of the world really does give us hope. Did you notice this? Jesus says, if you do not believe in me, you're in darkness and you will die in your sins.

But notice how today's passage finishes. Jesus says in verse 28, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.

And if you do not believe that I am He, you will indeed die in your sins. But when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He. As the Son of Man, Jesus, is lifted up on the cross, then we will be able to see most clearly that in His words, I am He.

[21 : 22] See, at the cross, Jesus' identity and mission are their clearest. It's like the cross is that central shaft of life, the central ray in which we see the light of the world most fully.

At the cross, we see most clearly who God is and what He's doing. See, at the cross, people tried to put the light out.

And yet, actually, it's where we see the light most fully. I want you to imagine, at the bottom of a garden, there's a very old and dark and damp shed.

Where inside it's very dusty and there's lots of rats scuttling about and mould and moss on the walls. Without Christ, the world is in total darkness.

A bit like that shed at the bottom of the garden. And yet, the story of John's Gospel is that Jesus loves that dark, damp, dusty shed so much that He willingly came into it to be the light of the world.

[22 : 25] And even the darkness, trying its hardest, could not put the light out. Because on the third day, after His death, the light of the world came bursting back out of the grave.

See verse 30, Even as He spoke, many believed in Him. Jesus said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Our world really is in darkness. Will you believe in and follow the light of the world? Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son into the world.

Thank You that even though the world can be such a place of darkness, You gave Your Son to be the light of the world. Thank You that it's true, that Jesus' words are true, that those who follow Him will never walk in darkness.

Please, by Your Holy Spirit, make us those who cling to the light as our only hope in a dark world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[23 : 32] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.