

# Light Has Come To The Intellectually Elite

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 29 December 2013

Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Pray with me. I'd give to your people gathered here this night an increase of your grace that we could truly hear your word to us and that in hearing your word we might receive you into that place in our life that you meant, there you're meant to reside.
- But in doing so, Jesus, help us not only to be hearers of your word and receivers but also doers of the same. As we live in this world in which you came and we've heard that you've been sent not to condemn but to save.
- So we ask that you would truly be about the kind of thing that only you can be about in our lives right now at this time. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
- Amen. Well, I'm James and it's good that Dan introduced himself to you.
- And I need to do that as well, though I've been here a few times but not nearly as much as Dan. And I come to you tonight to kick off a mini-series here at St. John's in the evening.
- [ 1 : 1 4 ] And you'll notice from your bulletin the title of tonight's talk. And I'll say a little bit by way of a backgrounder about the series.
- But tonight's title is Light Has Come to the Intellectually Proud. And I don't know about Aaron and Jordan and why they gave that to me.
- There's a whole list of sermons in this series that had to do with light. And in some sense that makes a lot of sense because even though we haven't hit Epiphany yet, we'll hit it a week after tomorrow.
- And so this is kind of a pre-Epiphany and then a season of Epiphany before we get to pre-Lent and then the season of Lent. And let me just draw your attention actually to the prayer for the season of Epiphany.
- And there's a book in front of you called The Book of Common Prayer. And it's on page 117, the prayer I want to draw your attention to. And we'll just have a quick look at this prayer and how it actually frames this season of Lent.
- [ 2 : 1 7 ] We've come through the season of Advent in which we've anticipated not the first coming of Jesus but the second coming of Jesus. And we long for that day when he returns again, one day to judge both the living and the dead.
- But now that we've come through that season, we have this other season of Epiphany which focuses actually on Jesus who's the light that has come into the world and come again. And here's this prayer that really focuses and frames our attention in this season and what it is that we're thinking about and what it is that you're going to be hearing about for the next six weeks.
- So the prayer goes like this. And why don't we actually say this together? Oh God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only begotten Son to the Gentiles, mercifully grant that we who know thee now by faith may be led onward through this earthly life until we see the vision of thy heavenly glory for the same thy Son, Jesus Christ, who with thee and the Holy Ghost who live and reigneth one God, world without end.

Amen. Now these prayers are great instructions for prayers in our life. I don't know how much attention you've been able to pay to these, but there's a form to them which is, I think, helpful in hearing about in terms of leading your prayer life.

And the first is just to address God and then acknowledge who he is. And you see that, oh God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thine only begotten Son to the Gentiles. That's an acknowledgement of who he is.

[ 3 : 46 ] Goes on from there with a petition and then after that an aspiration. And many of our prayers actually have to do with acknowledging who God is, praising who he is, and we always get around a petition, what it is that we want from him, isn't it?

But not often actually do we, after submitting that petition, then ask the question, well, what difference might that make? Or so what? If I get what I do, what I've asked for, what difference will that make?

And these prayers always have an aspiration after the petition. And this one follows on from that. Who know thee now by faith, and here's the aspiration, that we may be led onward through this earthly life until we see the vision of thy heavenly glory.

And so tonight we look at this theme of light and for this reason, that we would be led on to this vision of heavenly glory. And so the first theme, based on the reading that Sarah read earlier from John chapter three, verses one through 21, is going to kind of expose, as it were, this Jesus coming to the world as the light of the world, and the light of the world to the intellectually proud.

So I don't know why that might seem relevant to Anglicans. Do you? Rodney Stark wrote a book called *The Rise of Christianity*, and among other things in his book, one of the things that he identified was that Anglicans, more than almost every other Christian tradition, had the highest levels of education.

[ 5 : 18 ] And so this is a pretty kind of relevant subject, I think, to us here. That's not the reason that probably Aaron and Jordan chose it, though. They just chose it kind of in order because John three, being the first verse, comes first in this sermon series, and we'll have one from chapter four and chapter six, and so on and so forth.

But let me just back up a little bit to chapter one before we get to chapter three, and look at actually what John says in his overture, as it were, to this gospel.

He says this. He says, In the beginning was the Word. You know that. We'll pick up actually at verse four. And in him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Verse five. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. So here we see three things actually about Jesus, that he's the Word, that he's the life, and that he's the light, and it has to do with darkness.

That he is the light that's coming to the world about this darkness, but the darkness has actually not overcome him. And I think that there's something of an increasing darkness in our world. You know, there were dark ages, and I'm not sure that that's all done.

[ 6 : 35 ] And in the past, there are some signs of darkness, certainly in the world in which we live in today. Some of it's emotional. Some of it's social. Some of it's spiritual. Some of it's moral. There's certainly darkness in the world in which we live in.

And so it's important to look at how we actually have gotten in this position that we're in, and also how it is that we actually address it. And sometimes it has to do with how we can address it with some kind of knowledge that we have.

And so, we come to this subject tonight, and as we continue on with chapter 1, down at verse 12, I want to point just two things in this chapter 1 that is then brought out again in chapter 3.

John writes, There are two things that he names there that he now picks up in chapter 3 that we'll see.

And the first one is about belief, and the second one is about birth. And so we come to this person, Nicodemus, his encounter with Jesus in chapter 3, beginning at the first verse.

[ 7 : 54 ] I know this is a very familiar passage with you, and I hope that the familiarity of it won't keep you from seeing what it does have to say to us tonight.

And it's just a lovely passage, and I think we see maybe even some of what we're getting at in terms of Jesus being the light of the world, coming to the intellectually proud.

And one of the things that actually informs, I think, our pride when we address the darkness in which we live in the world, and how Jesus is the light that comes into that world of darkness, as with our knowledge, isn't that actually what sometimes is the pride of those who have access to various forms of knowledge?

And if you look at this with me in chapter 1, verse 2, we'll notice that Jesus addresses this with Nicodemus. He says, This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.

So Nicodemus has identified that he knows that Jesus is a teacher come from God. Hold it down with me then. Jesus addresses him in verse 8, the wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from.

[ 9 : 12 ] So Jesus addresses this knowledge actually that Nicodemus thinks that he has. And then if you continue on actually further with me to verse 11, Jesus says to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know.

Isn't it true then, I think, that some of our pride has to do with what we know and what we actually do with that knowledge and how we try to maybe overcome the world in which we live in or somehow become a little bit savvy and make our way through this world and do it in a way that really helps us.

And sometimes maybe we think that it actually helps others. But let's slow down and then go back over this a little bit more closely. Knowing that I think that at the root of pride for those who are intellectually proud has to do with our knowledge and what we do with the knowledge that we have.

So first of all, we have Nicodemus. Nicodemus, it says here, is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and he came to Jesus by night.

So Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, is really religiously very committed. And in some respects, he might be actually religiously liberal. There were the Sadducees who kind of contained God's word to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

[ 10 : 29 ] But the Pharisees believed that the word of God was more than that. It included the wisdom literature as well as the prophets. But nevertheless, here's this Pharisee who comes to Jesus who's really very committed religiously.

Not only that, but he's also powerful and influential. He's a ruler of the Jews, it says. But nevertheless, he comes to Jesus in the night. Maybe he's coming because he's just a little bit careful or just a little bit cautious.

But he comes to Jesus knowing actually what Jesus has done and then bringing that to Jesus' attention when he says to them, Jesus, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.

And he says this then, For no one can do these things that you do unless God is with him. He just makes this observation. A little bit of interpretation of well, hasn't he?

That they've observed what Jesus has been doing. They know that he's actually performed a miracle, probably the one in Canaan when he turned the water into wine. But also, Jesus went into the temple and cleared the temple because it wasn't being used as a house of prayer.

[ 11 : 39 ] Who knows? Maybe Nicodemus came to Jesus that night really thankful. Maybe that was his motivation to say, Isn't it great that you've done this? There have been all these things going on. No one has actually dared to stand up to those in the temple.

But he comes to Jesus and says, We know that you are a teacher come from God. And so Jesus then says to Nicodemus, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

I don't know about you, but that's not actually what my response might have actually been to Nicodemus if he came to me and said the things that he did. In some ways, it seems like it's actually coming out of nowhere. Who would have thought actually to say this, right?

But nevertheless, this is Jesus' response to him. I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And so, where in some respects is that, where's that coming from?

And Jesus is picking up on a theme here that's in Ezekiel, chapter 36, verse 26. I wonder if you could turn to that with me as soon as I find the page number for you.

[ 12 : 50 ] I'll tell you. It's on page 724. Ezekiel writes, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit.

I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and that you shall be my people and I will be your God. And so, he's alluding to a kind of a new birth, a new life, a new work that he desires for God's people to have.

And this is what Jesus is picking up on. He's saying, unless you're born again, unless you have this new life, you will not be able to do what it is that I have in mind for you.

And this isn't a unique theme for John. This comes up in Paul's letters when he talks about new life, not only in Paul's letters, but also Peter talks about the importance of a new birth as well.

[ 14 : 09 ] And this is Jesus' initial response to Nicodemus. But then Nicodemus kind of goes on from there, doesn't he? He says, but how can a man be born when he is old?

It does seem a bit preposterous, doesn't it? I mean, Nicodemus was probably much older than Jesus coming to him and he's just completely puzzled by this. And so Jesus continues on with this saying, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The second time he talks about the kingdom of God here. First up in verse 3 and now in verse 5 again. And then he continues on again and down in verse 7, do not marvel at what I've said to you, you must be born again.

So in other words, what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is, look, it's not enough to have a natural birth. You have to have actually more than that to enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus had great privilege and the reality is for those who have access to a lot of knowledge, who may be full of pride intellectually, this comes right to the issue.

And we're mostly kind of born into, I think, that's what we have access to. It's not actually something that we've achieved, we've earned. Granted, some of the knowledge that we have requires great effort on our part.

[ 15 : 26 ] But Jesus is saying, look, you've been born into this kingdom of Israel, but that's not enough. It's not enough to be naturally born what you actually need. What you really need, Nicodemus, is a spiritual birth.

You can't come by what it is that you want naturally. You can only come by it through the Spirit. And so he says, that which is born of flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

And I think that this suggests a few things when we think about the importance of the subject of being intellectually proud and how the matter of new birth applies to that.

And the first thing is this, when we think about entering the kingdom of God, which addresses our need for knowledge of God, it first of all makes us children of God, doesn't it?

If we are born again and we're made children, then we're children of God who is our Father. And it addresses our greatest spiritual need. It was way back in Genesis when the first sin occurred by pride.

[ 16 : 36 ] God then, we were actually separated from God and here Jesus is coming and saying, look, there's a spiritual birth that's available to you and that will restore, that relationship was broken by pride.

But it doesn't only, I think, address our great spiritual need, it also will address our social need. Sometimes, we must admit that the knowledge that we have can sometimes separate us from others.

and this knowledge then, I'm sorry, this relationship that is restored with God first by addressing our great spiritual need then addresses our social need with other people and that separation can then be addressed and dealt with in those terms.

So that's the first thing. Jesus says that he must be born again and that's a spiritual birth and not a natural birth. But it's not only about a spiritual birth that follows from this, it's actually about the importance of believing.

And so then that picks, this picks up, sorry, it picks up and we carry on in verses 9 all the way down through verse 21. Sometimes, verses 9 through 15 get lumped in with verses 1 through 8 but I think if we look at verses 9 through 21 you see that this whole section actually goes together as Jesus begins to talk about the importance of belief.

[ 18 : 03 ] So for instance in verse 12, if I have told you earthly things and you do not believe how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? And he continues to repeat the word belief which is again down in verse 15 that those who believe in him may have eternal life.

Continuing on verse 16 where he talks about whoever believes in him should not perish in verse 18 three times to conclude that. So he moves from spiritual birth to now belief.

Now I used to think that that I believed in order that I might be born again but what Jesus is saying here actually that in order to believe you must be born again and so he puts being born again first with then belief that that follows.

Are you following? Okay. So there are three things I just want to kind of point out that Jesus says about the importance of belief and that is who we believe in what is belief and then actually how that addresses our pride of knowledge.

Okay. So the first thing that Jesus is saying about addressing this pride of knowledge has to do with us believing in the son of man.

[ 19 : 29 ] In verse 13 Jesus says no one has ascended into heaven except he who has descended from heaven the son of man. And then he pulls this illusion out of number chapter 21 as he says and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so the son of man may be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus is drawing from Proverbs chapter 30 verse 4 I just wonder if you'd turn to that with me as we look at what he's doing in verse 13 here.

Page 551 we read he who has ascended to heaven has come down and he who has gathered the wind in his fists who has wrapped up the waters in a garment who has established all the ends of the earth what is his name and what is his son's name surely you know.

So when Jesus says no one has ascended into heaven except he who has descended from heaven the son of man this is actually what he's referring to this is what the author of these Proverbs the words of Agur of Jaka was anticipating and Jesus is now picking up on this son of man which is also in Ezekiel but Jesus repeats this then when he then refers to numbers when he says and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life and this is the great longing of our lives I think to have this eternal life and Jesus saying look I am this son of man not only that but I'll show you that when I am lifted up and just as the serpent was lifted up on Moses' staff so too will I be lifted up on a cross and that will be the way in which one has eternal life ultimately addressing the pride that we have you know the story in numbers that the Israelites they were longing for something more they were given the manna the bread of heaven but that wasn't enough for them and they complained about that and so there were these serpents and the serpents were biting them they were burning them and they wanted

Moses to take that way and so this was the way that God addressed their need to be delivered from the serpents so the serpent a snake was actually put on Moses' staff lifted up and as the people looked at that and saw that they were then forgiven and they survived but now Jesus is saying so as the son of man must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life what is it that they'll actually believe in it's not just the seeing of the son of man being lifted up but now there's something different it's the believing in the son of man that will give them eternal life and so then verse 16 and 17 follow these very famous verses we all kind of know that those are the comfortable words that we'll hear later in a communion service but often we don't kind of go on after that and know these verses which are really important for God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him so Jesus didn't come in to condemn the world right he came into it to save it

[ 23 : 34 ] I think that we know that but sometimes people think that no his coming into the world for some reason is this this judgment and instead of realizing that it's his bringing salvation we know that he will come one day again to judge both the living and the dead but this first coming into the world wasn't to condemn but to save and John goes on from there but whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already so condemnation actually preceded Jesus is coming because they didn't actually already believe but Jesus is being lifted up on the cross will give us that picture that we need to have to know that we're no longer condemned but we're saved and saved in the name of the only son of God so we have these two things this the son of man who comes into the world and our belief in him which saves us or justifies us and then we come to these last three verses where the subject of light is reintroduced again right it's interesting isn't it that this passage starts in the night and in darkness but it actually ends in light and sometimes it's our kind of external circumstances that God actually uses to bring about some kind of change in our life that he wants for us that we can't bring about ourselves and so look at this and this is the judgment and the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil it's interesting isn't it it's not just that people were blind we will see later that Jesus restores sight to a blind man but that's actually not what he's saying here he'll pick that up later but it's actually that people loved darkness rather than the light why because their works were evil for everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed so Jesus is this light who has come into the world exposed evil deeds and even though people have hated the light loved things that are hateful nevertheless

God sends his son into the world to be the light of the world and the light to the world it's interesting when I was first preparing this I stopped at verse 20 and not 21 I don't know why that was and I thought well that's that's a really interesting ending but the key verse is actually verse 21 look at that but whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God isn't it this great contrast whoever does what is true comes into light I would have thought whoever comes into the light does what is true but for some some way by the grace of God those who are seeking seeking Jesus in the son of man in the light of God seeking that truth you actually come into the light as you are seeking that truth and the purpose of that is that follows is so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God right so the works of God by the grace of God are carried out in God so these three things that we have then in these verses 9 through 21 we have the son of man we have belief in the son of man and why is that well it's so that we would come into the light the light of Christ and I think that this is great news for those of us who may be prone to a kind of an intellectual pride and I just kind of flag that a little bit

I don't know what it's like for you when you came into this church maybe three or four or five weeks ago and there was something that was new in the pew did you notice that there was a new bible and it was called it's called the new living translation did you notice that it was kind of hard to miss we got the hardback ESV and you got the paperback the NLT right and it's kind of actually exposed as maybe where where our hearts are I know we're an ESV congregation and probably most of us use the ESV to study the bible and then there's the NLT translation and I don't know you probably could have had a couple of responses to that right like yes the NLT I really like that paraphrase or you could have said something who would read the NLT how many of you read the NLT some of you good good well it's important to note that actually the senior editor of the ESV actually reads the NLT for his daily devotions and I just think that we can be prideful even about what we read whether it be the bible or other sorts of things but the good news is that Jesus has come into the world and he is the light of the world and we have that light not by anything that naturally comes to us or even by our own our own efforts or certainly even by earning that which we want but it's given to us by this new birth this spiritual birth that comes about in our life by the work of God and him only but that spiritual birth is actually for belief and it's one thing to be born isn't it but it's another thing to continue on and live from there and one of the things that we're really interested here at St. John's is that we continue to grow in our relationship with

Jesus Christ and be presented as mature and it all begins with this new birth but we don't want to stay as little babies and infants we want to grow in maturity as adolescents and adults over the course of our life all beginning with and can't even get off the ground apart from this spiritual birth that we have in Jesus Christ but continues on with this belief this trust this longing that we have that's only fulfilled by Jesus Christ and doing in our life what only he and he alone he alone can do and when I think of this belief I think of just the word of trust and the picture of trust that comes to my mind just something to hold is that when you go to as it were sit down in a chair at some point you come to the point of no return you're committed aren't you you know that you can begin to kind of sit down like this and you could kind of stand back up on your own couldn't you but at some point you begin to go down

I obviously won't do it here because there's not a chair behind me but you become committed and you trust you know that that which is behind you will hold you up and that's a picture of belief and trust in Jesus where you put your full weight of all of who you are spiritually emotionally intellectually socially in Jesus Christ in him only let me close with a poem this comes from the book A Widening Light and the editor is Lucy Shaw this has to do with the season of epiphany and Jesus who is our light and I think addresses our greatest longing to know that he's our savior we've been having epiphanies like suns all this year long and now at this close when the planets are shining through frost light runs like music in the bones and the heart keeps rising at the sound of any song and old magic flows in the silver calling of a bell rounding high and clear flying falling sounding the death knell of our old year telling the new appearing of Christ our morning star now burst all our bell throats toll every clap or tongue stun the still night

[ 32 : 20 ] Jesus himself gleams through our high hearts notes it is no fable it is he whose light glistens in each song sung and in the true coming together again to the stable of us all shepherds sages his women and men common and faithful wealthy and wise with carillan hearts and suddenly the star in our eye please pray with me and give to us the grace that we need to know that it's your work alone that brings about that new life through birth in Jesus Christ but take us from there Jesus to believe in you and trust in you and have the hope in you that you want and that only you can achieve in our lives and we can't bring about on our own that one day when we see you face to face we can say that so it is that it may be clearly seen that your works have been carried out in our lives because of God in Jesus name we pray amen you