

“EVERYDAY DISCIPLES – WITNESS”

Matthew 5:13-16

The great theologian Karl Barth, one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, spent most of his life on a massive series of volumes called *Church Dogmatics*, a huge work of systematic theology that changed the way many people think about God, the Bible and the Church. He is said to have met an eminent astronomer who was rather dismissive of him and his work, and the astronomer said to Barth, “I suppose all you’ve ever done could be summed up in the words ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so’.” Barth agreed and then replied, “And all your life’s work could be summed up in the words ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star: how I wonder what you are!’”

And therein you have a wonderful summary both of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of the mission of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Our security is in the knowledge that Jesus loves us, something of which we are constantly discovering more in the pages of the Bible. But the other little couplet is also very appropriate to Christians as well as to astronomers. Those little pinpoints of light in the velvet blackness of a night sky are obvious: they stand out clearly and challenge the domination of the darkness. But what lies behind them? Why are they there? What secrets do they hold?

In *Philippians 2:15* Paul says that the disciples of Jesus Christ should be like that – “*you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life*”. And Jesus himself, talking to his disciples (*Matthew 5:1*), says that they are “*the light of the world*”. Liz helped us reflect on the first part of that passage from *The Sermon On The Mount* a couple of weeks ago, comparing the followers of Jesus to salt. Today we are considering what it means to be “*lights for the world*”. Jesus says that his disciples should be like that, like points of light in the darkness, lights shining for others to see, so that other people say “*how I wonder what you are*”, so that their curiosity will be stimulated and their gaze drawn towards God.

The contrast between light and darkness is one which has fascinated men and women down through the centuries. It is a powerful theme in art, in literature, in music, in theatre and cinema. For most people, darkness is seen as dangerous, a place where bad things happen – whether it’s providing cover for the criminal or for the stray bit of Lego on the landing when you’re rushing to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Many people do not like going out in the dark and we do all kinds of things to hold back the darkness. For that reason, lots of people find the darkness scary. In horror films and thrillers, the nasty things happen in the dark. (There is actually a whole genre of thriller film called *Film Noir* – Dark Films.) Young children like to sleep with a light on so that they aren’t scared. For other people, darkness is depressing. Those who struggle with emotional and psychological problems often describe their situation as being “dark”. And the darkness can be very confusing: you can’t find your way or get your bearings, familiar landmarks are invisible, it’s easy to get lost. Anyone who has been on a night walk with young people will know how all these feelings can be rolled into one.

So darkness is a good metaphor for a world in which things are not as God wants them to be, a world which can be for many people dangerous, scary, depressing or confusing. There are so many things which happen which cause us difficulty, which mess with our minds, which upset our equilibrium, which cause us grief. We can easily lose our sense of direction, security or identity in such a world. Light comes into such a situation as a means of clarifying, of comforting, of directing. We describe a faint hope as “light at the end of the tunnel”, don’t we?

And into that world came someone who described himself as “*The Light of the World*” – Jesus Christ. In *John 8:12* Jesus says that quite clearly. He came so that no-one need put up with darkness any more. His arrival on earth and, eventually, his victory over the forces of darkness on the cross and his victory over the darkness of death at Easter meant that those who choose to follow his ways, who choose to adopt his agenda for life, can have their fear, depression and confusion replaced with a sense of security, an assurance, a joy, a peace that will enable them to move forward with confidence. As Jesus said, “*Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*” Later on, Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, “*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ has made his light shine*

in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Maybe some of you here this morning are feeling scared about the future. There may be some who are feeling anxious about what’s going on in your life. You might be confused, wondering what your life is all about, all for. It is actually as if you are flailing about in the dark, not knowing in which direction to turn, not knowing where you are or where you’re going. Jesus can shine into that situation and help you to see what’s going on. Actually seeing what’s going on might still be pretty scary, but Jesus can lead you out of it: as Peter puts it in his letter, he can “*call you out of darkness into his glorious light*” (1 Peter 2:9). So those who follow Jesus, who are his disciples, are those who shine with the light of Christ. It has always been one of the marks of God’s people. In *Isaiah 58*, the prophet tells God’s people that if they follow his ways and live as he asks them to “*their light will rise in the darkness, and the night will become like the noonday*” (*Isaiah 58:10*).

Which brings us back to these words in *The Sermon On The Mount*. Jesus is talking to his disciples here and he tells them that they are to be “*the light of the world*”. The disciples of Jesus are those who shine with the light of Christ, whose lives are lit up with the glow of his Holy Spirit, who have that certain something that marks them out from the mass of people who are afraid, dejected, confused. Dick France writes in his commentary on these words that “*Light, like salt, affects its environment by being distinctive*”. I’m sure you’ve hear people say of a particular person that they light up a room when they arrive – they have something about them that everyone notices. Jesus says that’s what we should be like. He’s talking about being **witnesses** for him.

Now, when we start to talk about witnessing for Jesus, many Christians get a bit nervous. They think it means they’ve got to start doing certain things, things that are usually but irrationally associated with witnessing in the minds of many people – things like preaching on street corners, like knocking on people’s doors, like giving tracts to strangers, like hauling their reluctant friends along to church. That’s what witnessing seems to entail – and many of us are not up for that. We get very nervous and anxious when we hear talk of “witnessing”.

But just look at what Jesus says here. Actually, look at what he doesn’t say. He doesn’t say, “You’ve got to work hard to be lights for the world.” He doesn’t say, “Try your hardest to be lights for the world.” He doesn’t say, “Go on courses and read lots of books so that you can be lights for the world.” He says quite simply, “*You are the light of the world*”. If you have taken that decision to follow Jesus, if you have concluded that living in his light is better than struggling along in the darkness then the light of Christ is already shining in you. You are already reflecting the light of Jesus Christ in your day by day lives. If you are a disciple of Jesus there is automatically something distinctive about you which is a witness to others, something that will cause others to think or to say, “*How I wonder what you are*”.

Now Jesus doesn’t imply here that we now need to do all kinds of other things to ensure that we are good witnesses for him. Again, it should be quite natural – “*Let your light shine before others*”. Just allow Jesus to shine through you. You **are** the light of the world. You reflect the light of Jesus simply by following him. So you bear witness to Jesus quite simply by letting that be obvious. Don’t hide it. Don’t try to cover it up. Just **be** what you are!

The trouble is, some people try to hide the fact that they’re disciples of Jesus. We’re so accustomed to this phrase that Jesus uses here that it’s lost its absurd force for us. We use the expression “*hiding your light under a bushel*” in all kinds of contexts to refer to people who are a bit coy but anything from their faith to their talents, that we fail to see just what a stupid concept it is. No-one lights a lamp and then covers it over so that it gives off no light. It is an utterly pointless exercise. In the same way, trying to hide the fact that you are a follower of Jesus Christ is similarly ludicrous.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a minister in Germany during the 1930s as Hitler rose to power and he was outspoken in his condemnation of Hitler (which eventually led to his imprisonment and death), as well as

in his condemnation of the mainstream German churches which were unwilling to take a stand and speak out against the evils of Nazism. In his most powerful book, called *The Cost of Discipleship* he writes this about these words of Jesus: “*Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.*” If we call ourselves disciples then we need to live out that calling – not by doing anything difficult or extraordinary, but by **not** trying to conceal what we are.

How can you and I be witnesses for Jesus Christ in our everyday lives? How can we witness for him at school, at college, in the workplace, amongst our friends, at the gym, in the club, in the pub? Listen to this, because it is deceptively simple: **be what you are!** Just live day by day as someone who knows Jesus. Be the kind of person who knows that Jesus has himself shone into the darkness and started to dispel your fears, your anxieties, your confusion. Allow the light of Jesus Christ to shine out as you model the joy, peace and love that he brings, the serenity of a life changed by the Light of the World. Then, as Isaiah wrote, “*your light will break forth like the dawn*”.

And together, that light becomes stronger. One candle can dispel the darkness, but just think how much brighter a hundred candles can be. As we encourage and support one another, so our communal light in this city becomes stronger and, as I have heard people say of you people many times recently, “*How I wonder what you are*”. What on earth makes you live the way you do? You’re not really preaching or proclaiming, not doing anything that might be identified by the convention speakers and Christian paperback writers as evangelism, as witnessing. You’re just living your lives the way Jesus asks you to, just getting on with things in a way that shines with the serenity that most people can’t seem to find, just **being** disciples. And when people ask that question, we can tell them the answer.

But let’s just finish by reiterating what we said earlier. If you are still struggling with the darkness and you want to find out a bit more about the light – or if the light in your situation is starting to get a bit dim, then please come and talk to one of us after the service, or during our last song, make your way to the front here so that we can pray with you. Liz and I will be here and while others are singing, we can pray with you that you will discover or rediscover the light of Jesus shining into your life.

Discussion notes on next page.

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Darkness can be seen as dangerous, scary, depressing or confusing, so it is a good metaphor for a world in which things are not as God wants them to be, a world which can be for many people dangerous, scary, depressing or confusing. Into that world came someone who described himself as "*The Light of the World*" (*John 8:12*). So those who follow Jesus, who are his disciples, are those who shine with the light of Christ. It has always been one of the marks of God's people (e.g. *Isaiah 58:8,10*).

The disciples of Jesus are those who shine with the light of Christ. "*Light, like salt, affects its environment by being distinctive*" (R T France) Jesus is talking about being **witnesses** for him. He says quite simply, "*You **are** the light of the world*". If you are a disciple of Jesus there is automatically something distinctive about you which is a witness to others, something that will cause others to think or to say, "*How I wonder what you are*". It should be quite natural – "*Let your light shine before others*". You **are** the light of the world. You reflect the light of Jesus simply by following him.

The trouble is, some people try to hide the fact that they're disciples of Jesus. No-one lights a lamp and then covers it over so that it gives off no light. In the same way, trying to hide the fact that you are a follower of Jesus Christ is similarly ludicrous. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "*Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.*" If we call ourselves disciples then we need to live out that calling – not by doing anything difficult or extraordinary, but by **not** trying to conceal what we are.

Being a witness is deceptively simple: **be what you are!** Just live day by day as someone who knows Jesus. Be the kind of person who knows that Jesus has himself shone into the darkness and started to dispel your fears, your anxieties, your confusion. Allow the light of Jesus Christ to shine out as you model the joy, peace and love that he brings, the serenity of a life changed by the Light of the World. And together, that light becomes stronger. One candle can dispel the darkness, but just think how much brighter a hundred candles can be. As we encourage and support one another, so our communal light in this city becomes stronger. When people ask questions about it, we can tell them the answer.

Questions for discussion

1. How does darkness make you feel? Why?
2. Where else in The Bible do we find light used as an image for God or Jesus?
3. In what ways is Jesus "*The Light of the World*"?
4. How are we to be "*the light of the world*" in our daily situation?
5. It's easy to say that we should just **be** disciples, but how does that work out in practice?
6. In what ways do we hide our light? Why?