

“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”

John 8:12-20

During this coming week we'll be thinking about the way in which Jesus' last few days before his execution were spent in the context of the Passover Festival, a week beginning with Palm Sunday, which we're celebrating today. But as we look at another of the "I am" sayings of Jesus, we find ourselves caught up in another of the great Jewish festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles – a kind of harvest festival. Come with me in your imagination as we join Jesus and his friends there.

The harvest has been gathered in. It's been a hard few weeks, with many late nights and a great deal of effort from all the family, as well as a few friends from the village. Now all the grain is safely in the barn; the grapes are heaped up in another storehouse waiting to be pressed into wine; there's a sense of relief and a great deal of thankfulness to God, who has made it all possible. The traditional response is to go up to Jerusalem and join in the festivities with many of the other farmers and vineyard keepers, as well as the general population who are grateful for God's continuing provision for them. For the best part of a week there are to be celebrations in the Temple courtyards as the people thank God for the harvest of this year and remind themselves yet again of the way in which God made it all possible in the first place by leading them out of Egypt many centuries before.

In the evenings a great deal of drinking goes on by way of joyful celebration. (That's why Eli assumed that Hannah was tipsy when she was praying in the shrine about a son, in *1 Samuel*). And then everyone gets together in the Court of the Women at the Temple to dance and praise God for his goodness. There is an elaborate ceremony involving the pouring out of water from great pitchers and then the lamps are lit. Four huge oil lamps are positioned around the courtyard and the priests' assistants pour great quantities of oil into the bases of them. Massive wicks are created from the worn-out clothing of the priests and stuffed into the necks. Darkness falls quickly with very little twilight between the strong sunlight and the rising of the moon, which follows very rapidly at this time of year.

Suddenly the lamps are lit and the whole courtyard is bathed in their light. A cheer goes up from the revellers and on the night air more cheers are heard from around the city as the light can be seen from every part of Jerusalem. Those who are particularly pious give thanks for the way in which the pillar of fire led the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Other prayers are said thanking God for the sun's light and for the moon, but everyone is careful to turn their backs to the east so that no-one can misunderstand their actions as actually worshipping the sun or moon themselves.

And this is where we find Jesus, taking part in this Feast of Tabernacles, the most exuberant of the three main Jewish festivals. He's there (we read that in *John 7:2,14*), keeping a fairly low profile to begin with as he knows that the Jewish leaders are out to kill him. But as the water is poured out of the huge stone pitchers, he cannot resist the opportunity to say a few words to those around him about the way in which he sees himself as the giver of living water (look at *7:37-39*). It has a real impact on the people, but not as great as the impact he has later on. On the last day of the feast the lamps are shut off and Jesus uses the contrast between the glowing exuberance of the brightly lit courtyard and the lowering darkness of the lampless gloom to make another dramatic statement about himself. As the people get used to the darkness again, Jesus stands up and says "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*"

Just imagine the impact that must have had on the people who were standing around him at that point. What on earth does he mean? Isn't this just more blasphemy from the carpenter's son from up north? The "*light of life*" is God, so how can Jesus appropriate these terms for himself? In most religions light and gods are closely intertwined – the pagans worship the sun and the moon; solstices are very important spiritual events; eastern religions put a lot of emphasis on illumination – and here is Jesus putting himself up there with all of that!

As we saw when we looked at Jesus calling himself the Bread of Life, there are all kinds of ideas bound up in this, but the main point is that Jesus' meaning goes far beyond the merely physical and material. He is talking about true light, and the words John records are very important. As we look at these words in the light of what we read in the rest of the Bible, we can begin to see just what he is trying to communicate and just how that can touch our lives today. Let's have a look at three ways in which that can be true for us.

1. JESUS IS THE LIGHT WHICH BRINGS LIFE

Physically, materially, we need light for life. Someone kept in a darkened room, even if that person is fed properly and so on, will soon deteriorate if they are denied any light. If you put your pot plants in a part of the house where they get no light, it won't be long before they've drooped and died. Light is necessary for life – that's why, no doubt, the story of Creation in *Genesis* puts light first in the list of things God called into being. If God hadn't done that first, everything would have kept dying before he could get on to the next thing!

Jesus, as the true light of the world, goes far beyond that. His light enables us to live eternally and spiritually. John makes that point in the first few verses of his gospel – “*In him was life, and that life was the light of men*” (*John 1:4*). When it comes to living eternally, to knowing that we are not to be punished for our sins by spending eternity in hell, here is no other source of life than Jesus. In *2 Corinthians 4:4*, Paul talks of the “*light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*” and it is that gospel that is the only possible way to ensure real, lasting life.

If you don't know Jesus, then, from the point of view of eternity and salvation, it's as bad as not having access to ordinary light for your physical health, in fact, it's a whole lot worse. When Jesus talks about “*life*”, he is talking about life which is not bounded by the frontier of death, but of continuing and eternal life. Leave Jesus out of the picture and you're going to be right up the creek at the end of your earthly existence – just like a pot plant in a dark cupboard.

2. JESUS IS THE LIGHT WHICH GIVES LEADING

Notice that Jesus talks about “*following*” the light. In my younger, fitter, more energetic days I used to help run some camps for kids in the summer. And on the first night we'd take them out for a walk through the woods in the dark – partly to tire them out and partly to scare them just enough to ensure some kind of discipline for the rest of the week. (We usually failed on both counts!) The person with the torch would go in front and others followed. It would have been pretty stupid if the person with the torch went at the back, because then those in front couldn't see properly and would have no idea of the right way to go.

I remember once travelling across Germany to go skiing in Austria and I was driving a minibus following a coach along the autobahn. I had no idea of the route we were taking and we were driving through the night in fairly murky weather. I was simply told to follow the tail lights of the coach in front. But driving non-stop down a German autobahn in the middle of the night is pretty boring and very tiring, so I felt myself nodding off. The only way to counteract this was to pull out and overtake the coach every now and then, then let it overtake me again. At about two o'clock in the morning, out in the middle of nowhere, I pulled out in front the coach only to watch it in my rear-view mirror disappearing down the slip road and on to another motorway!

We mentioned earlier that part of the reason for the Feast of Tabernacles was to remember the way in which God had led his people through the desert by means of a pillar of cloud when visibility was good and a pillar of fire when it was dark or foggy. The Israelites had to follow it to keep on the right track. If they tried to go on ahead or decided they knew a better way, they'd have got themselves hopelessly lost.

If we are to make our way safely through life and into eternity with God, we need to follow Jesus. He is the light in our darkness. All around us is stuff we can't make sense of, stuff that will confuse and frustrate us, but ahead of us is that light, the light of Jesus who knows the way perfectly, who can guide us safely to our eternal destiny. In *Hebrews 12:2* we read that we are to "*keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus*" as he is the only one who really knows the way. To try and work it out for ourselves, however logical, rational, reasonable we might think we are, ends up with our losing our way and losing our security. I've been reading quite a bit recently by people who think they know better than we poor fools who follow Jesus and what strikes me more than anything else about people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, about the people who blog on so-called "deconversion" websites and who ridicule the faith to which we cling, is their offensively patronising attitude and their appalling arrogance. They have an assumption that they know better than anyone else what life is all about and they have no need to follow anyone, let alone the Light of the World, to make their way through this life and into the next. I don't think I'm stupid (many of you may wish to contest that), but I'd be utterly lost if I didn't have Jesus to follow.

Again, at the beginning of this gospel, John talks of Jesus in terms of "*The Word*" and that connects in our minds with some words from *Psalms 119* – "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path*". Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*, "*By your words I can see where I'm going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path.*" If we are serious about Jesus and following him, one of the best ways of finding which way we should be going is to read the Bible regularly and carefully. Jesus leads us through the words of the Bible as well as through the example of his life, and through our other experiences and circumstances.

3. JESUS IS THE LIGHT WHICH ENABLES US TO LEARN

No doubt you've all seen those cartoons where one of the characters suddenly has a bright idea and at that point a little light bulb appears above his or her head. We talk of clever people as being "bright" and those who aren't quite so gifted in the intellectual department as being "dim", don't we? When someone finally gets the answer to a question, we say "It's dawned on him". If you've got a book published by the Oxford University Press and it's a fairly old edition, you'll find the university crest inside the front cover – a shield with the Latin words "*Dominus illuminatio mea*" – "*The Lord is my light*". Light and learning are very closely linked in our minds, aren't they?

So Jesus, as the Light of the World, allows us to have learning, in the sense of knowledge that will help us. In *2 Corinthians 4*, from which we quoted earlier, we read in v6, "*God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*" If you look back over the few sentences before that, you'll see that Paul reckons the Devil is trying to keep us in ignorance so that we cannot see the truth of the gospel – he doesn't want us to find out about the possibility of life with God, doesn't want us to know that there is a choice, an alternative to his way of living in darkness. Even those who appear so clever, the intellectuals and academics, the thinkers and the sceptics who dismiss the Christian faith as the superstition of deluded fools are themselves in darkness, their eyes blinded by the "*god of this age*", as Paul puts it. They fail to see the Light of the World, or, having seen it, turn away and ignore it in their hopeless quest to do things their own way.

Someone once said, "*In darkness there is no choice. It is light that enables us to see the difference between things; and it is Christ who gives us that light.*" Jesus makes it possible to learn about that choice, he makes things clearer and shows us the sure way ahead. He offers us in every sense, en-light-ment. Now, we have to be a little cautious about using that word, because there are many religions that teach that the only ones who are really holy are those who have had the true enlightenment from on high, the only people who can be saved are those with the right kind of divine knowledge. Once again, as we saw recently, it can become a kind of religion that teaches you get into heaven (or wherever) if you have the right number of spiritual GCSEs. And there are those, too, who think of the European Enlightenment,

the period when the rise of science really seemed to do away with the need for faith. Jesus doesn't give us just head knowledge, nor does he dispense it only to a few. Jesus' learning, Jesus' teaching, his enlightenment is totally available to all who seek it.

Light establishes its claim not by arguments, but by shining. You don't need to know about wave theory or particle theory if you want to see in the dark. You don't need a degree in electrical engineering to turn the lights on – you do what you know is right (press the switch) and enjoy the brightness. Jesus doesn't expect you to have a degree in theology or a diploma from the *Everyday With Jesus Through The Bible In A Year Club* to be able to enjoy the benefits of eternal life – life which begins now as you start to experience it in all its fullness and which extends on into eternity in the presence of God. All you need to do is allow his light to flood into your life to show you what the real choices are – the choices between good and evil, between right and wrong, between hope and despair, between selfishness and selflessness, between life and death – and then believe.

Jesus is the Light of the World. He gives us life, he leads us and he enables us to learn the truth about our lives and about the gospel of salvation. Will you accept his life, learn about his offer of life and follow his leading day by day?

Discussion notes on next page.

JESUS SAID: "I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD"
John 8:12-20

Jesus is at the Feast of the Tabernacles, similar in many ways to our Harvest Festival, at which great lamps are lit in the Temple courtyard. On the last day of the Feast, the lamps are extinguished and Jesus uses the occasion to make another dramatic statement about himself and his mission. For the Jews who would have been listening to him, "*the Light of Life*" was God himself, so Jesus' words would have had immediate impact.

Jesus' meaning once again goes beyond the merely physical and material: he is talking about the true light and its effect on the lives of those who accept it.

1. Jesus is the light which brings life

Physically, light is necessary for life – the reason why God created it first. But Jesus goes far beyond that and his light allows us to live eternally and spiritually. (Look at *John 1:4*; *2 Corinthians 4:4*). From an eternal point of view, not knowing Jesus is as bad as not having light for physical health.

2. Jesus is the light which brings leading

Jesus talks about "*following*" the light. You need to have the light in front of you if you are to find your way in the dark. If we are to make our way safely through this life, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus (*Hebrews 12:2*) and to use the light of his Word (*Psalms 119:105*).

3. Jesus is the light which enables us to learn

Light is often associated with learning (e.g. *enlightenment*). Jesus, as the light of the world, brings us knowledge that will help. Look at *2 Corinthians 4:6*. We need to recognise that the Devil is trying to blind men and women to the truth of the gospel.

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways does Jesus make himself known as the light which leads? How can we know his guidance in our everyday lives?
2. Many religions talk about enlightenment as a process. Is there a sense in which we become more "enlightened" as we grow in our faith? Does that make us better Christians?
3. Some people believe that the Light of Jesus shines in other faiths, but they call it by different names. Do you believe that there is something of Jesus in all religions? Why/why not?
4. In what ways can we "*keep our eyes fixed on Jesus*"?
5. Can you think of any other parallels between light and Jesus?

Some suggestions for prayer

Pray for those who are seeking God's guidance at the moment.

Pray for those in other religions who have yet to acknowledge the light of Christ.

Pray that we will continue to reflect the light of Christ in our community.