

## Matthew 5:13-16 – ‘You are the light of the world’ (9<sup>th</sup> February 2014)

Light is one of the universal religious metaphors in our world. The Jews have Hanukkah, or festival of lights; Hindus and Sikhs have Diwali. Buddhists talk about the path to enlightenment. Light is one of the few images to have almost universally positive connotations. 1.5 million people each year even take about 12 million trips to Blackpool for its illuminations, and other attractions, making it the second most popular single European tourist destination after St Peter’s in Rome. Strange but true.

So what is it about the Christian understanding of light that makes it so distinctive? What have we got to say about it that sheds any unique, well, I have to use the word, *light* on the subject? Or is the passage we had read just a Christian version of something which all religions can aspire to?

I think we first have to acknowledge that light has natural connotations with goodness and happiness, something which most people can connect with. Light also naturally leads us towards a higher power. Ancient peoples worshipped the sun and moon for that reason, because they were sources of light. As religious understanding developed, light came to symbolise something with divine connotations. And of course, our own understanding of God’s character sees light as something uniquely attributable to God himself. We don’t worship created objects like the sun any more, but the bible only applies 3 nouns to God which aren’t names: does anyone know what they are? God is love, God is Spirit and God is light. Indeed the first words that God is recorded as speaking in Genesis 1 are: ‘Let there be light’. Light is fundamental to God’s character.

And that’s where we have to begin today. Before we work out what it means for Jesus to say ‘You are the light’, we have to remember that he also said: ‘I am the light.’ This is incredibly important, a double challenge to the culture of the time. To the pagans, he was clearly pointing people away from the sun, the source of light usually worshipped, to himself. And to the Jews: well, if you were a Jew, then you would clearly have understand this as a reference to Jesus’ divine identity. The prophets *pointed* to the light. Only Jesus said he was the light.

And this of course is the first unique thing about our Christian understanding. For all the festivals of light, only Christians believe that God himself, the true light in human form, walked the earth. But the second thing we learn from our main passage today is even more amazing. Because the quality of divine light did not just pass from God the Father to God the Son. God the Son in Matthew 5 commissions his followers to pass it on. Jesus did not just say: I am the light of the world. He said: You are, as well. Wow! Just imagine that. Jesus commissions *you* to something of the role he himself adopted on earth. The light of life, as he put it in John 8, is given to anyone who follows him, that we may become *lights* in the world too. Just pause for a moment to consider how extraordinary that is. (PAUSE)

Now, theologically, this can only happen because Jesus' followers receive His Spirit. I think that's what Jesus means elsewhere by having the light of life. Jesus' life dwells in us by His Spirit; and because one of the innate qualities of God is light, then that light now shines out of us by His Spirit. Pretty cool stuff. But I don't really want to dwell on dense theology this morning, because Jesus doesn't really. His famous words in Matthew 5 are meant to be understood as a practical illustration of what it means to live as a Christian in the world. So that will be my focus as well. Let's assume that a Christian has Jesus' light. What then does it mean when Jesus says: You are the light of the world?

I think this passage lays down three challenges for us. Let's look first at **the darkness**. This might seem an odd place to start but Jesus' metaphor would have no real meaning unless the light served a purpose. We must acknowledge that we live in a world of darkness.

Now that might seem fairly easy to recognise in some of the more notorious hotspots of the world. We might think today of Syria, or Chad or Zimbabwe. But these are extreme examples. The true test for us is to recognise the darkness that exists within our society, in our own city, or even our family or workplace. The New Testament is uncompromising in its depiction of Christian life as being a battle, where the kingdom of light confronts, and is opposed by, the kingdom of darkness. And the darkness is all around us, and more overt than it has been for generations. We see a society where spend on gambling has increased 700% since the mid 1990s, and the number of problem gamblers has doubled. Where in a recent survey 20% of married people admit to taking off their wedding ring before going on a night out. Where the average household debt is £9,000, not including mortgages.

We must even recognise the darkness within ourselves. Even with Jesus' light, there will be parts of us that also dwell in darkness. But, as Jesus stresses, the light of life is not something we possess in ourselves, it is *given* by him, and therefore we are not promoting ourselves but Jesus. As v16 says, our good deeds lead people to praise not us, but our Father in heaven.

Robert Browning once wrote: The lark's on the wing, the snail's on the thorn, God's in his heaven – (ASK?) all's right with the world.' What a lot of rot! I mean, we get the point. We all feel good on a fine spring morning. But all is most definitely not right with the world. And we can't get anywhere with this passage unless we are prepared to acknowledge the reality of the darkness – darkness 'out there', but also 'in here'. Darkness which needs light. For after all, light only works in the darkness.

But now for some good news. Because although the NT is uncompromising in its view of the world, it likewise never encourages us to dwell too much on the darkness. We recognise it, but our preoccupation should be with the light. Light will always be lighter than darkness will be dark. Indeed if you put light and darkness together there is only one

winner. Darkness only exists to the extent that the light shines. So the second challenge for us is to recognise **the light** within us.

Now this might seem simple enough, but it's interesting that Jesus puts this passage straight after the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the meek, the mourners. Blessed are the losers, the people the world rejects or belittles. And it's a fair question to ask whether those people can have any influence at all in the world. You might feel the same. I'm the only Christian in my team at work, or maybe in my family. What possible influence can I have?

Thankfully, Jesus disagrees. Straight after he commends the meek and the mourners, the last and the least, he says, you know what: YOU are the salt, you are the light. The two fundamentals that everyone needed – what Pliny called *sale et sole* – salt and sun, salt and light. Salt in the ancient world was valuable, it could do everything: it flavoured, it preserved, it disinfected. But the fundamental quality of both salt and light is the same: *their value is in their distinctiveness*. Salt reacts and changes things in the process, light drives away darkness.

Indeed you might say that their power is in their distinctiveness (Tasker). And this is important for us to note. The temptation for us in an increasingly hostile culture is to find ways of conforming, of fitting in. But I'm not sure that's how Jesus would see it. We are citizens of another kingdom, and as we engage in society, our task is not to conform but to transform. Salt and light transform things. (PAUSE)

But salt and light exercise their distinctive power in different ways. They have different approaches, and different purposes. Let's look at approach briefly. Salt exercises a subtle influence, doesn't it? You don't need much of it in food, but you certainly notice it if it isn't there. Light, on the other hand, is much more obvious. 'A city on a hill cannot be hidden.' (v14) I think that is *part* of why Jesus uses these two different metaphors. You may be more of a salty person, subtly influencing things. Or you may be more of a lighty person, obviously standing out and standing up. We need both. But actually *each* of us needs to be *both* – we can't separate into salt and light. Jesus didn't.

And probably the central challenge for most of us is to be more light than salt. As our society becomes more overtly anti-Christian, we will most often work more like salt, subtly flavouring things, and that's fine, we need that. But we are the light too! Social action doesn't offend people, truth does. We need to shine the light of truth into our society. We need to stand up for the value of life when it's clear the Government Commission has stacked the odds in favour of assisted suicide. Maybe we need to be brave and challenge our workplace hierarchies who are using the cuts or the economic downturn to force through immoral or unfair policies. Does that strike a chord with anyone? *Light shines*.

But it's not just about approach, it's also about purpose. To quote Stott again, he interprets the qualities of salt as primarily negative, preserving things from decay. Whereas light is positive, attracting offering an alternative, better version of reality.

If we think first about salt, here's how Stott describes what it means to be salt today:

*'Take first our vocation to be salt. The apostle Paul paints a grim picture at the end of the first chapter of his Roman letter of what happens when society suppresses (out of love for evil) the truth it knows by nature. It deteriorates. Its values and standards steadily decline until it becomes utterly corrupt...*

*Now Christians are set in secular society by God to hinder this process. God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: where is the salt?....*

But alongside the challenge, we need also to provide a positive vision of a better reality. This is where the light comes in. Light gives warmth, it illuminates the path, it helps plants to grow. And, as Jesus says, the primary way of manifesting light is through good deeds. It's not enough to condemn and challenge: we must offer something better. Light blows the darkness away. What one act of goodness can we do at the moment which might cause people to praise God, the Father of Light? (PAUSE)

Which leads us to our final thought. We've looked at the darkness, we've looked at the light. But finally, **the choice**. Because the other difference between the two metaphors Jesus uses is that there is an element of conditionality to being the light. Although it's foolish to do so, it is possible to put a light under a bowl (v15). And that might be how we feel at the moment. It's hard to be a stand-out, open Christian nowadays. But we need to beware the dangers of hiding our light. In those days, all light was created by fire. And what happens if you cover a light with a bowl? Starved of oxygen, it blows out. So we must choose. Are we going to cover our light or reveal it? Indeed are we going to live like that city, that simply cannot be hidden?

Thankfully, as I close, it's good to remember that we do not create the light. It is given by Jesus to his followers. We don't earn it. We can cultivate it and get oil for it, but God makes it shine. Jesus doesn't say make your light shine, but *let* it: let your light shine. All you have to do is to choose not to hide it. The default position, as it were, is light.

It will take courage: but we worship a God who is more than able to empower our small actions. You may feel like the people described in the beatitudes, and wonder how you can be of any influence. Take heart from Jesus' words: if you resolve today that you *will* let your light shine, you *will* offer good deeds for the glory of God, then people will see you, and maybe some will even come to praise our Father in heaven.