

## 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023 – The People of God #9 ‘The Light’ (Ephesians 5:8-14, Matthew 5:13-16)

When our kids were much younger, I remember a time when our son was obsessed with torches. It seemed like every time we entered a shop which sold any sort of hardware, we would come out with another type of torch. And so, one summer’s day, in the middle of the day, when it’s about as bright as it can possibly be, there we were, standing at the supermarket tills about to buy another torch with whatever was left of his pocket money. Which we did.

And as we left the shop he grabbed my arm and shouted: ‘Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!’

It’s great isn’t it, when your kids are young and they think you can do *everything*. You not only look after them and play games and make their food and make them feel safe, but you can make it *dark*; you probably also built the house they live in and made the car we drive. Electricity comes out of your fingertips and the planets move at your command. They don’t know yet that your knees are shot and you can put your back out just bending down to tie your shoelaces and you can barely rewire a plug, let alone build a house. You’re daddy, you can do *everything*: ‘Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!’

The purpose of light is darkness. No point in light otherwise. That was true in the beginning: ‘The earth was formless and empty, and God said “Let there be light.”’ And it’s true now, it always has been. Jesus comes to us as the light of the world – as or St John says in the great beginning to his gospel: ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’ (1:5)

And today, we’re thinking about what it means for the people of God to be light. Because, as most of us know and as our gospel reading made clear, **Jesus did not just say ‘I am the light of the world’ – he also said *you are the light of the world*.** Just take a moment to let that sink in: our Lord commissions to do what he did in the world, to be little lights, shining for him.

But how can we possibly fulfil that? None of us are even remotely close to being like Jesus – and those that think they are have a Messiah complex and should probably get help for that. So what does it really mean? First, let’s notice that Jesus says *let your light shine – not make it shine, let it shine*. In other words, we *already* have light, we just need to make sure it’s not covered. And that’s because we have Jesus – it’s Jesus’ light that shines in our lives.

I like to think of it like the beautiful stained glass we have in our churches – and I can talk about All Saints or St Mary’s here, but the point is the same. Think about a stained-glass window at night – it’s dark, it has no light within itself. But when the sun rises and shines through the window... sit in the chancel at All Saints and feast on the window with Jesus the Good Shepherd, or sit in the south aisle at St Mary’s looking at the window of St Catherine and St Agnes on a bright sunny morning and the enjoy the colours sparkle. The window comes alive! I think that’s a brilliant illustration of what it means for us to shine like lights in the world – we let Jesus’ light shine through us, allowing all the colours of our lives sparkle for him. We don’t make our lights shine – we let them shine.

But there is *one* thing we need to do – and that’s to **make sure that we don’t hide our light, we don’t cover it up.** That’s the one bit of the process which is up to us. We *can* choose to hide our light, and we can do that in all kinds of ways. I think we can be so keen not to appear different, or to make people uncomfortable, that we go to the opposite extreme...

...It's good not to force faith down people's throats, whether they like it or not – but, on the other hand, if we live just like everybody else and remove all references to Jesus or our faith, then it's not being who we are, either. It's kind of living a lie, isn't it?

So how do we make sure our light stays uncovered, shining brightly and naturally? Here's where the other passage in Ephesians helps. St Paul picks up Jesus' teaching and says – well OK now you're light, *your job is to live as children of light*. And he gives us some very practical tips:

**First, choose the things of light** – in this case v9 'goodness, righteousness and truth'. Much of this chapter in Ephesians is all about what we feed ourselves with. You probably know the old saying GIGO – garbage in, garbage out; but it's also the other way round: goodness in, goodness out.

What's your diet? Is there enough light in it? Don't get me wrong, I don't think Paul is saying we avoid all the darkness of our world: we have to live in the real world where we are – indeed what is the purpose of light unless it shines in the darkness? – but we *can* choose some of what we absorb.

Here's one practical example – I love detective dramas and crime fiction. For me it's a puzzle to solve, and actually it affirms the value of human life – every death is treated as important, every victim is honoured by their killer being caught and justice being done. But there are some I avoid because there is no light at all. So occasionally we'll stop watching one because every character is corrupt, it's clear justice will be ambiguous at best – ultimately the sacredness of life is not being respected. There has to be some goodness, righteousness and truth, or we switch off.

**Second, recognise the darkness without celebrating it** – Paul says that our lives will naturally 'expose' the deeds of darkness (v11); I don't think he is calling us all to be snitches, rather the quality of our lives shines to all around us. We don't withdraw from the world, we accept that there is darkness close by. But what we don't do is celebrate it – so he says in v12 'it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret'. In other words, we avoid juicy gossip and titillating rumours – those sorts of things always need oxygen to burn – let's not fuel that.

**Third, be willing to point to the light when the opportunity arises.** Or, as Paul says in v13, 'everything that is illuminated becomes a light.' In other words, if your life shines the light of Jesus and that is noticed, don't be afraid to point to the source of the light. Say where the light comes from, so that Jesus' light can shine through them as well. Jesus' light wants to make new lights, new stained-glass windows reflecting his light.

So if someone asks you why you're so joyful or peaceful, tell them. If someone asks you why you don't lie or overclaim your expenses or join in with office gossip, tell them. Not in a preachy way, just in a natural way. Be you – and let Jesus' light shine.

**Finally, know your power source.** This takes us back to where we started: Paul finishes this paragraph by quoting what many scholars think is a line from one of the earliest Christian hymns: (v14) 'Wake up O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' We've no idea what the tune was, but it reminds us that it's *Christ* that shines, not us. So, as with everything else in the Christian life, we ask Jesus to fill us with his light, so that it's his light that shines through us.

We are the light of the world because *he* is the light of the world. And may the Lord grant us all grace to let his light shine in us and through us, that we may be children of light, bringing others into that light as well. Amen.