

Light to the Nations

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

During these early weeks of the New Year, and in what the Church calls the season of Epiphany, the theme of light, of revelation, of vision is very strong. Light is one of the most powerful images in the Bible. In the parables of Creation in the Book of Genesis, the first thing the poets tell us God says is 'Let there be light.' The Israelites, fleeing captivity in Egypt, were led through the desert by a pillar of cloud by day, and by night a "pillar of fire to give them light." The psalmist sings of a plea to God to 'send out Thy light and Thy truth', and that God's Word is 'a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.' Light shines from heaven when the angels sing at Christ's birth, and the light of a star guides the wise men to Bethlehem. Jesus tells us to let our light shine out in the world, and that He Himself is, 'the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

Without light, life fades and dies; without light we cannot see where we are going; without light, things grind to a halt. A power cut plunges a community into a cold, dark place, punctuated only by the cries of generations whose internet connection has been cut and whose screens have gone blank!

Light can be a difficult thing too. The shouts of air raid wardens in the Second World War to 'put that light out' unless it attracted the aircraft and bombs of the Luftwaffe. The light that sometimes shines into places we would rather keep dark, because of secrets, or shame, or guilt, or fear. Bringing things into the light is not always easy for many people, for in its brightness, we lose some control, and we stand revealed and exposed. Light can be blinding.

In the world of science, light is energy, it has a dynamic. Light moves things. I think that is captured in our passage this morning from the prophecy of Isaiah:

"I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

The reality of light, and the image of light, changes things, and that's what makes it such a powerful image in the life of faith. When light comes, nothing remains the same, nothing can be hidden, change comes.

This passage from the Old Testament comes from a bitter time in the history of ancient Israel. "The community was fractured. One part was living in exile along the banks of the Euphrates (the river that flows through eastern Turkey, into Syria and then Iraq). Another was scratching out a living in the homeland of Judah." It was a desperate time for both communities, the feeling of spiritual dislocation was pervasive. All shared the shame of defeat by a foreign power with imperial designs, their pride carried off like a trophy for a conquering king. Their God, they thought, had either been defeated, or worse, abandoned them. Would God ever return to them? What should their priorities be now, given that their Promised Land had been taken from them, their Temple destroyed, and their faithfulness shown to be shallow?

It's the kind of struggle many have with the idea of God today. When traditional answers no longer seem to meet contemporary questions. When unexpected death or illness strikes someone down. When natural disasters wipe out communities. When political solutions crumble in the face of changed circumstances. When people are no longer clear about what they want or need, having been sure for years. When roles inherited in society, in families, in the workplace no longer fit personal aspirations. When cultures, or generational attitudes to life clash. When international politics become grubby, or introverted, or short-sighted, or visionless. When the common good is sacrificed for personal gain.

A contemporary theologian writes:

We now live in a time where the very idea that God is real and present in our lives is no longer accepted. Indeed, it's widely contested. Belief has been made fragile...(It is called) "the malaise of immanence." Now grounded in the material, tangible, rational realm, we've lost the sense that the ordinary flow of life has any meaning. The rituals of our lives don't seem to point to anything greater anymore... How do we help those who no longer need a God (to) encounter the living God in their lives?ⁱ

Into this struggle, in C6th BC Babylon, in C21st Scotland, God shines light. Maybe there are only a few faithful left; maybe they are clinging on to faith by the fingertips; maybe the lament goes up

that things are no longer the way they used to be, or ought to be; but into that place, that time, that situation, God shines light.

God does more than shine light: God gives some guidance, some idea, some pointers as to what to do next. When God's people are given as a light to the nations, they are given something to do and to be. Open eyes, bring freedom, go into the dark places. Shine.

God tells the people that someone will come to show them what to do and what to be. Who else can it be other than Jesus? Then God says the those who find themselves helped by Jesus, helped by His example, then become the ones who carry on Christ's light.

Jesus identifies with this passage. It gives Him the blueprint for His ministry. It's what He reads in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry. It is what He offers to us today and says – here are things for you to be doing now, following My example.

These last few weeks have been tough for me and for many because there have been the deaths of people who have served our congregation in different ways for many years, two women and one man whose temperaments, attitudes, experience and commitment. They made things of beauty, made music, visited, polished, provided food, offered friendship, read from the Bible. They shone. They provided light.

Through generosity, hard work prudent budgeting, and commitment to keeping going, the financial deficit we budgeted for looks like it may have been reduced by a third. Through our hard work, we have shone. We have provided light.

This building, full of people at services and events over Christmas, welcomed in members of our community who were, by and large, astonished at what we have had the courage and vision to do with this building. Not without controversy, not fully complete, but we have provided a bright place, a flexible place, that played host to nearly 700 children; that played host to a wonderful carol concert for 200 people; that played host to a small service for 20 people who fund the festive season hard; that played host to believers, doubters, seekers, deniers from around the parish, and around the world. It has shone. It has provided light.

Our work is far from over, and there are huge challenges for us to tackle in 2020 about the kind of church we need to grow into, but with the faith that we have shown in the past, we will shine, we will provide light.

If we, in this small corner of God's kingdom can shine, and provide light, then when these pinpricks of shining join up, we bring light to the nations. A light, given the news of these last weeks, the nations need more than ever.

Jesus took these words and sought to mark every moment of His ministry with the vision they expressed. He took care of the bruised reeds; He cupped His hands around the dimmest wicks until they began to shine. The vision of Isaiah is sweeping in its scope, but specific in its practices. It takes care of the vulnerable and the fragile, it goes to the dark places in life, and shines gently.ⁱⁱ God says at the end of the passage, "See, the former things have come to pass." When Jesus rose newly baptised from the waters of the Jordan, He entered a ministry saturated with the vision of light Isaiah offers. Jesus' whole life was a passionate response to God's call for this new way of living, bringing light to the nations, and light to all God's children.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Andrew Root, The challenge of being a pastor in a secular age

ⁱⁱ Stephanie A Paulsell, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, p222