

11. THE ILLUMINATING PRESENCE OF JESUS

John 8v12.

From February to May 2000 the National Gallery hosted an exhibition called "Seeing Salvation - the Image of Christ". On display were some famous paintings of Jesus. I made more than one visit to that exhibition. One of Holman Hunt's most well known paintings was on display : 'The Light of the World.' Jesus is standing at a door knocking, waiting for entry. He wears a crown of thorns. The door is closed and covered with brambles and there is no handle on the outside. He stands there in the darkness holding a lamp. **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

Hunt's famous painting does not visualise Jesus words as powerfully as the original context of John chapters 7 & 8. It is the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. Pilgrims have come bearing fiery torches to the temple area, which is lit by a great candelabra. The light from this candelabra illuminates the whole city. The light is prophetic. God's house is a light to all men, One day the Messiah will come as a light to the nations. It is in this context that Jesus declares **"I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

This morning we will linger on this mighty statement. **"I am the Light of the World"**. First we will try to understand Jesus' words. Then feel their impact.

So what do they mean?

The **I AM** sayings are unique to the Fourth Gospel. At first glance they look unremarkable. We use such language all the time. "I am John Wilthew. I am a Geordie. etc". But in the context of the New Testament and on the lips of Jesus, the phrase has a meaning way beyond anything we are familiar with. Why? Because "I AM" was the signature of God Himself. At the burning bush God revealed His name to Moses as I AM WHO I AM. To be the I AM means there is none "before" God and none "after" God. He is the One and Only Living God.

When Moses asked who had sent him - what is your name, to authenticate the message you want me to take to them ? the reply came, say I AM sent you. But it is very different with Jesus! He doesn't say : "I AM" has sent me. He says: I, I AM - The Bread of Life; the Good Shepherd; the Door; the Way the Truth and the Life; the True Vine, the Resurrection and the Life. And here "I, I AM, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD." Little wonder this inflamed the religious leaders. When Jesus used this same expression a little later they shaped up to kill him. **Ch. 8v58,59:** "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I AM. At this they picked up stones to stone him." It was blasphemy. Jesus was claiming to be God.

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. In the Old Testament God Himself is closely associated with light. He is the One who illuminates by His Glorious Presence. In the very beginning God illuminated creation with the words "Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good." (Gen.1v3) God's Presence went with the Israelites as He brought them out of slavery in Egypt - a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, illuminating their way in the darkness. (Exodus 40v34-38)

The “Shekinah” glory of God’s Presence filled and illuminated the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (in the wilderness) and then the the Temple. No wonder the Psalmist sang, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” (Ps. 27v1)

“God is light: in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1v5)

New Zealander Ian McCormack was stung four times by a deadly box jellyfish in Mauritius. Despite being pronounced dead, he revived to describe an encounter with God. This is how he described it. “I saw this incredible light. It looked like the source of all power, of all light, the centre of the universe. More brilliant than the sun, more radiant than any jewel, any diamond, even more radiant than a laser beam light. And yet I could look right into it. And as I looked I was drawn right into it, like a moth into the presence of a fire; and as I was drawn waves of light started to come off, emanating off the source, waves of comfort and warmth, waves of peace, waves of joy, waves of pure, unadulterated, clean, uninhibited, undeserved love. I saw what I believe was the glory of the Lord.”

This great theme of light is one which John highlights in the Fourth Gospel. It is introduced in his Prologue. Ch. **1v4-9**. “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it / overcome it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John (the baptist). He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself (i.e. John) was not that light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”

This “true light” is the illuminating Presence of God Himself, in the Person of Jesus Christ. The Light who brings salvation. The Light who leads men and women out of the darkness of unbelief and slavery to sin.

And then here in **Ch. 8v12**. **“I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”**

My message from our text is a very simple one. It is this: *Our first priority is to glorify Jesus Christ. Because He is the Light of the world whenever you and I revel in His glory & His splendour, two things happen.*

1. Christ’s illuminating Presence restores and energises us.

“Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, **but will have the light of life.**” This is so important for us to grasp as believers. Glorifying Jesus Christ as Lord is vital for our health and well being as believers.

It may be worshipping alone or here on a Sunday. It may be meditating on God’s Word or reading devotional literature. It may be listening to a great Choral Classic or the latest CD by Matt Redman. But as we dwell on Christ’s splendour and His beauty and His perfections - the light of His glory nourishes us, restores us, heals us, energises us.

A week’s holiday in the sun makes you feel energised and healthy - but it cannot compare with basking in the Presence of Jesus, the Light of the World.

John Piper alters the angle but says much the same thing. He writes “The sun of God’s glory was made to shine at the centre of the solar system of our soul. And when it does all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the centre. We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding splendour than there is in beholding self.” (J. Piper: ‘Seeing and Savouring Jesus Christ’)

“I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Make sure you do not read these words and shift your focus from Jesus to yourself. The Christian gospel is not about you. Or about me. It is about “seeing” the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. And this kind of seeing is the key to the healing of our disordered lives.

As we follow Jesus with our eyes fixed on Him, like the Israelites following the pillar of fire, we will not walk in darkness. Instead we will enjoy the light of Jesus that produces life and health in us. “We all with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3v18)

But something else happens when we revel in the splendour of Christ’s glory.

2. Christ’s illuminating Presence leads others out of darkness.

They will become aware of their spiritual condition, see Jesus for who He really is understand what He did for them on the cross, and then they will want to worship Him too. God’s glory is so centred in the Person of Jesus that when He is lifted up, men and women, boys and girls begin to “see” who He is. This is because God the Holy Spirit is active, revealing Jesus in His glory - and because Jesus is the Light of the world.

God has so arranged things that the newest believer can worship and declare Jesus, and others will come to see who He is. The most uneducated or inarticulate believer can worship and declare Jesus and others will come to see who He is. There is nothing more effective than simply lifting up Jesus, the Light of the world.

The illuminating Presence of Jesus overcomes darkness. John 1v3 “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

When St. Patrick took the gospel to Ireland around 455 AD he headed for Tara, a centre of witchcraft and idolatry. He arrived at Easter, which coincided with a great pagan festival when all lights were to be extinguished and all fires put out so that only the King of Tara might provide light for the people. But Patrick kindled a huge fire which lit up the whole of Mag Breg and began proclaiming the message of Jesus, crucified and risen. The pagan King’s wise men warned him that unless the fire was extinguished immediately it would flood Ireland with its light and burn until Doomsday. They warned, speaking of Patrick: “He goes around Munster men and preaches to them and baptises them and leaves them clerics and churches.” So the

King sent soldiers to capture Patrick but he slipped through their net and continued preaching throughout Ireland (See David Adam 'The Cry of the Deer')

The Light of Jesus cannot be overcome. Once it shines it illuminates men and women's darkness. In October 1555 Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned at the stake for proclaiming the Biblical Gospel. As he died Latimer turned to his friend and said his famous last words: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

The same is true here in Northumberland. In the Priory ruins on Holy Island stands a statue of St. Aiden, the pioneer of the gospel here in the north. He is holding a lighted torch. It is the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. That light has sometimes been dim in this County but it has never been extinguished. Others have lit their torches from it and passed it on, right up to this present day. We, together with others, carry it now.

So let's lift the Light very high. Exalt Jesus Christ. Glorify His name. Worship and adore Him. Let His splendour fill your soul - for our own spiritual health, and for the healing of men and women around us.

John Wilthew. April 2005

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1. What do you picture when you hear the words "I am the Light of the World"? (e.g. a brilliant sunrise etc).**
- 2. What was the context of Jesus' words when He first spoke them in Jerusalem?**
- 3. What do you understand by Jesus' use of the expression "I AM", and His claim to be THE LIGHT? What does this tell us about Jesus?**
- 4. How can we be spiritually restored and energised? What have you found most helpful in your own experience?**
- 5. Pray together for Christ's light to illumine people's lives all around you - especially in the run up to our "Let's Go" week (May 31st - June 5th). Pray specifically for your friends and neighbours.**