

Sermon

Sunday, 19th July 2009

I am the light of the world
John 8:12-20

As you all know over these joint services during the summer,
We are dealing with the great I am sayings of Jesus.
Last week I commented that in doing this,
We are talking about not merely adjectives or images to describe Jesus,
But rather
We are dealing with the very nature of what God is like
Today Jesus tells us "I am the light of the world"

Sometimes in the Bible,
And in the gospels in particular
Little snippets of information are given that you barely even notice until you look a little deeper,
And such is true of the reading that Karen shared with us today,
Jesus taught all this in the temple, in the room where the offering boxes are kept,
In other words the temple treasury.

Why is this so important?

Because it gives us a deeper understanding of why Jesus said I am the light of the world.

The treasury was in the temple courts,
In the court of woman to be exact,
Which is an undercoverd outer court of the temple,
The treasury consisted of 13 giant jars under the balcony of the court.
The jars were known as the trumpets because of their shape – narrow at the top shaping out to large rounded base.

I know that most folk think that the church today is always asking for money,
And that ministers are often seen as trying to find ways to get more money from people,
I know to that many of our members find it a bind to have to give to the church out of our
already meagre resources,
But compared to the Jews of Jesus day you don't know how lucky you are.

You see each of those thirteen trumpets had a purpose.
The first two were for the tax which every Jew had to pay for the upkeep of the temple,
The next two were for the costs of making offerings in the temple which every Jew had to do
regularly,
The next one was for the tax which every Jew had to pay towards the wood which was used in
the temple offerings,
The next collection jar was for the tax that all Jews had to pay towards the incense used in the
temple,
And the next jar was the tax every Jew had to pay towards the upkeep of all the golden vessels
used in the temple,
The remaining six jars were for voluntary donations which every Jew was called upon to make
as part of their devotion.

All of this means simply that the treasury was one of the busiest places in the temple,
Everybody ended up in the treasury most days who lived in Jerusalem,
So what a place for Jesus to go and teach and preach,

He would have met most of the population of the city just by being in this one place.
So often when we read about Jesus going to the temple,
We think of him retreating from the world,
We think of a place of solitude and quiet,
We think of Jesus speaking in a hushed voice,
But as you can see this could not be further from the truth.
Jesus went to where the people were in order to communicate with them.
I wonder what would happen if we as a church were to do the same thing,
Instead of retreating our faith into the sanctuary of the church,
If we were to live our faith and our church out in the open,
I wonder what that would mean for us?

But there is another and even more important reason why Jesus spoke these words
I am the light of the world,
In this place where he was preaching.

You see one of the greatest of the Jewish festivals is the Feast of the Tabernacles,
Celebrated every year to commemorate God's leading of the people under Moses through the wilderness,
He laid then by the pillar of fire,
And so on the first night of the feast of Tabernacles,
Four giant candelabra were set up in the treasury court,
And the candles lighted,
It was said that the light from these candles was so bright that every house in Jerusalem was illuminated,
Then the religious leaders would sing psalms of praise around the candles until morning.

Now imagine how powerful Jesus words are in that setting,
Some scholars even argue that he was preaching these words during that very festival,
Imagine in that context,
Saying I am the light of the world,
Willie Barclay sums up Jesus meaning thus:

"You have seen the blaze of the temple illuminations piecing the darkness of the night. I am the light of the world and for anyone who follows me there will be light,
Not only for one exciting night,
But for all the pathway of life.
The light in the temple is a brilliant light, but in the end it flickers and dies. I am the light which lasts forever."

That image would have spoken so deeply to those who heard Jesus,
Because they could see what he was offering.
Light is one of the ways that God is often described in the Bible,
And it is one of the images associated with the messiah for the Jews,
The one who would come from God to save them,
So in such a claim,
Jesus offers himself,
As no less than the messiah,
The one sent from God.

But,
As he so often does,
Jesus gives a completely different meaning to that image,
Instead of the blinding light of a great warrior,

What Jesus offers is something different altogether.

A friend of mine is a sailor,
And he has told me stories of being a sea far from land,
In the darkest watches of the night,
And how there is utter pitch blackness.
There is no light anywhere.
But if a ship where to show a light it could be seen for miles,
Just because it is the only light.
When Jesus describes himself as the light of the world,
I think that some of that shining out and being noticed is what he means.

We live in a world which is filled with choice,
A degree of choice that past generations could not have ever dreamed off,
We have choice in where we shop,
We have choice in what we eat,
We have choice in where we work,
We have choice in how long we stay in education,
We have choice in our jobs,
We have choice in where we shall live,
We have choice in what we shall believe,
And in how we decide the things that are important to us.

There is so much choice.

But in the midst of that choice Jesus stands out like a light in the darkness,
The one who brings forgiveness,
The one who offers love unlimited,
The one who invites us to share our every day with him.

Maybe one of the criticisms which could be levelled at the church is that we have not pointed out Jesus to others,
We have not pointed to the light that shines,
We have instead focused on the way we live our lives and the things that we do,
The rules that we follow the traditions that we hold to,
But beyond all of that.
More important than all of that,
Is Jesus the light,
Shining in the darkness,
And as church we need to remember that our primary function is not to exist,
But rather point to the light.

I am not much of a gardener,
I don't know weeds from flowers to be honest with you,
So I find that the best I can do in the garden is to do as I am told.
So last summer Alison and I decided that it was time to clear up the garden at the side of the manse,
It is mostly shrubs and bushes,
And over time had become overgrown,
With all the different bushes merging together.
By the time I had finished,
There was little left of the bushes,
What had once been so lush was now little more than sticks poking up from the ground.
But what amazed me was how quickly new growth came,

How many new plants began to grow,
In clearing away so much of the braches we had exposed other plants to the light,
And they grew quickly freed from their darkness.

Something of the same imagine is in mind when Jesus speaks about leading his people out of darkness.

Because the truth is you can live your life without God,
Yes you can,
Loads of people in our town are doing just that,
And they are getting on all right it seems,
Some are even pretty successful.
You can live your life without God,
But that's like the plants in the darkness under the bushes,
Sure they survive,
Some even grow,
But it's when they are freed from everything else,
When they have access to the light that they really flourish,
So too for us,
It is when we are in the light of Christ,
That we truly grow,
We grow in faith,
We grow in relationship with God,
We come alive,
This is the purpose we were made to for,
To be close to God,
To glorify him in our lives,
And we are never more alive,
Never more fully who we are meant to be than when we are close to God.
It's not just that Christ stands out in the sea of choices
As the best choice,
But even more
It is in the light of him that we truly flourish,
It is in the light of him that we reach all our potential as human beings,
Jesus is the light,
He is the one who leads us to the meaning and purpose of our lives,
He is the one who draws us close to God,
He is the one in whom we can feel whole.

Jesus says,
I am the light of the world.

May we follow him out of any darkness in our world,
May we follow him to the peace of relationship with God,
May we also point to Christ the light by the way that we live our lives,
By the faith that we hold and share.

In Jesus name
Amen