

## **The Light of the World**

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* for the Wolvercote Festival Service, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2013, at 10.00 am at St Peter's, Wolvercote.

Matthew 5, v.14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid'

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At this time of year, when we have just had the longest day, it is perhaps fitting that the theme of our service today should be light: one of those elements of our world which we take for granted, but without which we could do nothing. The writer of Genesis, trying to produce a coherent picture of creation, was addressing very much the questions that modern physicists seek to answer, identifying elements of creation that are critical to human existence, and recognised that light, along with water and energy, must be foremost among them. Thinking beyond these physical necessities, we all know how sunshine transforms our experience of landscape: the gardens, the fields and the settlements are physically the same on a dull, wet day, but the way we see them is utterly different when they are swathed in sunshine. In Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem which Paul read this morning, the world is 'charged with the grandeur of God' which 'flames out, like shining from shook foil' – here light is portrayed in spiritual terms, with the Holy Ghost brooding over the world with 'bright wings': nature is never spent', says Hopkins.

In the great prologue to St John's Gospel, we have another approach to creation and first things: here light is seen in human as well as physical terms – 'in him [God] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' Here we have a clear sense of light that is a source of human life, that shines forth to give guidance, that is strong enough to resist the counter-force of darkness and death. John the Baptist, the prologue says, 'was not the light, but came to testify to the light'. That light was Jesus, 'the true light, which enlightens everyone'. Isaiah foretells God's call to Israel to be the light of the world, sending Christ as 'a covenant to the people, a light to the nations' (42,6). Jerusalem, the city set on a hill, was supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world but, tragically, the people who were supposed to be light-bearers had become part of the darkness.

Jesus acknowledges the role foreshadowed in Isaiah, saying 'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world' (John 9, 5). As a child I remember being given a postcard of Holman Hunt's great allegorical painting of Jesus, 'The light of the world' – the 1850s original is in a side room of Keble College chapel. It illustrates a verse from Revelation (3,20) 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock', showing Jesus preparing to knock on an overgrown and long unopened door. It is a door which has no handle, and can only be opened from the inside, representing Jesus' patient willingness to enter even the most obstinately shut mind, but never forcing himself in. It is a wonderfully symbolic painting, portraying God's light, the light of Christ, as a force that is eternally open to each and every person. Charles Wesley, in one of his greatest hymns, stands on the other side of the door – our side – with the words 'kindle a flame of sacred love, on the mean altar of my heart'.

But flames, and lights, are to be seen, not hidden. A lighthouse is there to guide and protect ships, helping them to find the way that is safe. When the Spanish Armada approached British shores, the quickest way to spread the news in the sixteenth century was to light a series of beacons. The path of the Olympic torch symbolises the inclusiveness of the Olympic Games, bringing them to every part of the host country. A big event often ends with a firework display – brilliant lights reinforcing a sense of celebration and sharing. In relation to people's lives and abilities, we must all have used the saying 'don't hide your light under a

bushel'. And when it comes to the light within us – that flame of sacred love, however weak – that too is something that is meant to be seen, not concealed. And it is not something that should only be visible in church. Jesus did not say 'You are the light of the church' but 'You are the light of the world': a Christianity whose effects stop at the church door is not much use to anyone. It should be visible in the ordinary activities of the world – in how we interact with those who serve us and those with whom we work, how we play a game, how we deal with minor problems and irritations, how we respond to ethical issues. At the end of the day the business of simply being a Christian in everyday life is the most effective way to spread the light of Christ.

This Festival service comes for me at a very providential moment, which I hope you will not mind my sharing with you, because it seems to me to illustrate perfectly our theme of light in the world. On Wednesday I had the very sad experience of attending the funeral of one of my former students, Charlotte, who died ten days ago at the age of thirty. She had suffered since the age of fifteen with a tumour near her eye, but despite the distress and time off for medical treatment, she achieved top A level grades and played both violin and bagpipes. During her time in Oxford she had to undergo further operations, and I was amazed and humbled by her courage and positive spirit throughout. This continued after she left university in 2004, working in the NHS but undergoing further surgery, losing one of her eyes and then suffering secondary tumours in her lungs. Unusually, the surgeon who had treated her throughout came to her funeral, in a Staffordshire moorland village church that was literally overflowing with people. In a tribute that was not among those scheduled in the order of service, he described her as the most remarkable patient he had treated in his entire career. I can think of no better example of someone who was truly a light to the world, who in her short life influenced so many others for good in every context – her home community, Oxford, her work and the hospital where she was treated.

The city of Jerusalem may have failed in its appointed role, but communities as well as individuals can reflect light. Some are much more caring than others. Some have much more going on in them than others. In both cases it is very often the presence of enough people who care about the community, and who are prepared to give up time and share their talents, who make all the difference. This early summer season, when we persist in expecting warm sunshine against all the odds, is very much the time for community events. They go under various names – festivals, as here in Wolvercote and Wytham, but also fêtes, fairs, feasts, carnivals and others – but they all represent an enormous amount of community effort, comprising the contributions of many individuals to a cause that they believe to be worthwhile. That cause is much more than simply the events that take place, enjoyable though these are. It is the bringing together of people who live here, the reinforcement of a positive sense of identity and community spirit, things that last all the year round. Both individually and collectively it is a reflection, generation and spreading of light: Wolvercote and Wytham do not quite qualify physically as 'a city built on a hill', but they can make their contribution to bringing light to the world, and the Festival is certainly part of that.

Amen