



Thought for the Week 17th January 2021

READING

1 John 1

The incarnation of the Word of life

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.

Light and darkness, sin and forgiveness

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

SERMON

I'm sure you've heard the statement, "They are as different as day and night."?

Light is a constant theme throughout the Bible. Genesis 1 opens by saying that all was darkness and then God said, "*Let there be light,*" and *there was light*. When God's people were lost in the darkness of slavery in Egypt God spoke to Moses in a the bright light of a burning bush and then he led the people through the desert by a pillar of fire at night. King David says "*The Lord turns my darkness into light,*" (2 Sam 22:29) and "*the Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear.*" (Ps 27:1). Isaiah encourages God's people to "*walk in the light of the Lord,*" (Is 2:5). John in his gospel tell us that when Jesus was born he was "*the light of men that shines in the darkness.*" (John 1:4-5) And, when the old man in the Temple, Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms he said that he would be a "*light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people, Israel.*" (Luke 2:32). And Jesus himself confirmed this when he said, "*I am the light of the word. Whoever follow me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" (John 8:12)

The idea of light is a common one in John's writings – he uses it over 40 times in his Gospel and in the Book of Revelation as well as several times in his letters. Paul also uses this same kind of contrast between darkness and light when he is speaking of the old life without Christ as compared to the new life in Christ – for example in Ephesians 5:8-14 he says to the believers, "*You were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord.*" He is saying that before we came to Christ we were dead in our sins, without any light whatsoever and content to be darkness. But then something happened. We became aware of our sin and its offense against God, realised that we could do nothing about it in and of ourselves, threw ourselves upon God's mercy and grace and have been made "*light in the*

Lord.” Because Jesus came to die on the cross to save us, we are forgiven – the darkness has gone and in Christ we are now walking in the light. Or at least we are supposed to be!

John wrote this letter which we call “First John” (it’s actually more of a sermon than a letter) because in some of the early churches there were people who called themselves “Christians” and claimed to be following Jesus, but they were not actually walking in the light of Christ at all.

In verses 1-4 John sets out his credentials as an apostle who had been with Jesus, so we know what he has to say is authentic and reliable. He then launches straight into one of his major themes the necessity of Christians living and walking in the light.

As we look at this little passage near to the beginning of a new year and at a time when things are far from normal in the life and work of our church fellowship, maybe we should evaluate our lives in the light of scripture. Are we living as children of light should be living? Are we shining brightly in a darkened world or have we grown so dim that we can hardly be distinguished from non-Christians? Let’s see what we can get out of this scripture and how we can apply it to our lives as we live in dark days. John puts it very plainly and simply: God is light and there is no possibility of any darkness in him at all, therefore, if we are walking in darkness, then we are not in fellowship with God at all!

1 Peter 2:9 says, *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*

Everyone who has put their faith and trust in Christ has been called to live a different life from those around us who are still groping in darkness and sin. We have the responsibility to show up in the world by living a contrasting way of life - by showing that Christ really does make a difference in how we live our daily lives. Wherever we go we can cast an illuminating beam of light into the dark corners and be a positive influence on those who are still in darkness. In order to do this Paul says, *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Romans 12:2). This is not an overnight happening but usually a process as we seek to live out our lives each day.

Many, many years ago two brothers earned their money by stealing sheep and selling them. As happens to all thieves, one day they were caught. Rather than kill them the local people decided to brand the two brothers on the forehead with the letters S. T. for sheep thief. The action so embarrassed the one brother that he left and was never heard from again. The other brother was so filled with remorse that he stayed and tried to reconcile himself to the people he had wronged. At first the locals were skeptical and most of them wouldn’t have anything to do with him. But he was determined to make restitution. Whenever there was sickness, the sheep thief was there to help care for the sick person. Whenever there was work that needed to be done, the sheep thief showed up to help. He was always there to lend a helping hand and he soon became an integral part of the community. His life was lived for others and as a consequence he was a friend of all and became well respected in the community.

Years later a stranger came through town and as he sat eating his lunch, he noticed the old man with the strange brand on his forehead. People would stop and say a few words to him and even the children seemed to like him. The stranger’s curiosity caused him to ask someone “What does the strange brand on that old man’s forehead stand for?” The person thought for a minute and said, “It happened so long ago that I don’t rightly remember. Maybe ST stands for SAINT.”

How do we go about living as children of light? First of all we have to want to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. Our actions should reflect our faith. We obviously need to steer clear of

questionable things as well as things that we know for certain are just plain sin. Our actions must correspond to light. Paul names three things that are produced: goodness, righteousness, and truth. These are in stark contrast to malice, injustice, and falsehood

Goodness comes from a Greek word that describes love in action. It refers to the giving of oneself. In I Thessalonians 5:15 Paul says, *“Always pursue what is good both for yourself and for all.”* But a life of goodness just doesn’t happen. If you don’t practise self-sacrificing love in the little daily things it won’t happen for the big things. Christ in our lives makes a difference, and because of this we are gradually changing to the point that we make a difference.

The great US statesman Benjamin Franklin wanted to convince the citizens of Philadelphia to light the streets at night to protect against crime and as a convenience for evening travel. When he failed to influence them by words, he bought an attractive lantern and placed it on a long bracket in front of his house. Each evening he lit the wick and his neighbours noticed the warm glow in front of his house. Passers-by appreciated the light and soon others began placing lanterns in front of their homes too. Eventually the city authorities recognized the need for well-lit streets.

Walking in the light of Christ means making our lives shine so that others will see the need for God’s light in their lives as well. Walking in the light not only produces goodness which reaches out to others around us but produces righteousness. Righteousness means living in right standing with God. If we are pursuing right standing with God and others we will live the same on Monday morning as we lived on Sunday in church and people will see it. We shouldn’t need to go around telling others, *“I’m a Christian.”* It will be obvious to them.

The third thing that walking in the light produces is truthfulness. It means the absence of deception. Truth is about what we say whereas goodness is about what we do and righteousness is about how we live. Paul says in Ephesians 4:25 that we are to *“put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour.”* Verse 4:15 says that by *“speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ.”*

The fruit produced here--goodness (toward others), right-standing (before God), and truth would make a tremendous difference in our lives because it would begin to permeate every area of our life. We all know that we don’t measure up like we should in the light of God’s spotlight, but we continue to walk in the light we have been given. We continue to shine.

:A man took his young son on a visit to York Minster. His father pointed out all the saints who were represented in the beautiful stained glass windows. *“What’s a saint daddy?”* the boy asked. The father thought for a moment but before he could reply the little boy looked up at a window that the light was shining through and he said, *“I know – it’s a person who God’s light shines through.”*

Let us be persons who the light shines through.

But where do we start? If we see that we are not shining as brightly and we are not really walking in the light, what do we do? In verse 7 John says that if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. From the wider context of First John it is obvious that fellowship, or lack of it, was one of the problems in the churches to which this epistle was written. Some of the people had moved away from the basic teachings of the apostle and claimed to have new spiritual knowledge which put them in a different bracket to the rest of the people in the fellowship – they considered themselves to be a *“spiritual elite”* and looked down on others. In particular some had taken on a Greek philosophical view that stated that Jesus could not be both God and man – either he has a god who appeared to look like a man, but without a real body or he was just an ordinary man who had a special anointing from God while he was alive.

John comes back to this in more detail later in the letter, but he is not afraid to say that those who deny the divinity of Jesus are walking in darkness. "Darkness", Gary Burge says in the NIV commentary on John's letters, "is an atmosphere that denies the truth of God. It is like a fog on a sunny morning. Darkness is where God's glory cannot be found." John is highly critical of these people who have shifted away from the truth because they are ruining the fellowship.

This same problem has dogged the Christian Church throughout history. Martin Luther never wanted to leave the church in which he grew up, but he knew that many of the traditions that had taken hold of the church were not in accord with the scriptures and that as a result many were walking in darkness when they thought they were walking in the light.

You don't have to look far to find the same problem today. There are some who think that they, and they alone, have a monopoly on the truth, that the way in which they worship God is the only way that pleases God and as a result they will have no fellowship with other Christians. There are some who claim to have special supernatural experiences of the Holy Spirit who have left and become very critical of the more traditional churches and their leadership and others who have not shared their experience.

Spiritual elitism always damages Christian Fellowship, and of course, it can so easily happen with local congregations and within denominations. The result can so easily become walking in darkness rather than walking in light. Of course, we need to remember that Satan creates darkness and is the Prince of it, but we are also capable of doing the same through our fallen choices, our deception and our sinfulness. And before we know it, we become so accustomed to darkness that we prefer it to the true light.

Back in the middle of the last century when electricity was first provided to individual homes across rural Ireland, news came that a particular village was to be connected to the national grid. The McDonalds were the first to be connected and they decided to open their home to their good neighbours for the first switching on of the electric light. Mr & Mrs Murphy and their family from across the street were there. Mr McDonald was very excited and made a little speech about how this was going to change everyone's life as he threw the switch and the McDonald's living room was lit up in bright light. "Oh, how wonderful it is!" said Mr Murphy. "Oh how dirty it is," said Mrs Murphy under her breath as she looked around the room and decided that they wouldn't bother getting connected up to this new electric light.

John is looking for us to model a Christian life that is like the spotlights on the stage of a darkened theatre. The darkness all around the stage is prominent and there is a distinct boundary to the lighted area. Like the actors on the stage if we are walking within the area that is created by God pure, hard, revealing but guiding light, and are working together for God's glory then others, like the audience in the theatre, will see the kingdom of God at work. As Jesus himself said, recorded in Matthew 5:16 – "...Let your light shine before me that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Amen.