

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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LIGHT OF THE WORLD

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Psalm 51:1-12

John 8:12-20

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." We know the words quite well, and for centuries people have found them to be an inspiration and a comfort. Light in darkness, when so much of life seems dark and confusing, light to live by, to steer by, all found in Jesus, a wonderful promise. And yet, for Jesus, it turns out that these were dangerous words – they could have led to his arrest, because in defending them he invoked God as his Father and as witness to the truth. And to make it worse he was saying these potentially blasphemous things in the temple itself, defiling, as his opponents would have thought, its purity.

They were dangerous words and they were disputatious words. The Pharisees did not like them at all and there was a long discussion afterwards, the beginning of which we read, which covered Jesus' authority, his origins, his future crucifixion and his propose, and what it means to be a child of Abraham – one of the most precious identities of the Jews. It was a discussion, but not a calm one and at the end there were those who picked up stones to throw at Jesus – but he escaped.

He escaped and left the temple and the very next thing he did was to heal a man who had been blind from birth. He was the light of the world, and he knew that his light would never shine most clearly in wordy arguments, it would shine in actions: something which the church has sometimes forgotten, at least at its higher levels. He healed the man, he gave him light where all he had known was darkness, and he did it to help the man, the individual before him whose life was curtailed; but he also did it to show what he meant when he said that he was the light of the world. In John's gospel, the healings and miracles are described as signs. Just like the pictures in a book, they are illustrations to go along with the words that Jesus speaks, especially to go along with what he says about himself.

The Jews assumed that the man must have sinned to be so punished as to be blind. It wasn't just the Pharisees who thought this, but the people as a whole made this assumption. We know this, because when Jesus and his disciples encounter the blind man, it is the disciples who ask him "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

This was part of the general understanding of what we call original sin, and we find the clearest reference to it in the Psalm we read today. Psalm 51 is ascribed to David and we are told he wrote it or sang it after he had been convinced of his sin with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. He says in verse 5: *"Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me."*

The idea of original sin is that through the sin of Adam and Eve, literally or figuratively, all of humanity has fallen from God's original purpose of perfection. We inherit that failure in our DNA, as it were – not that they had heard of DNA back then. It is because of our fallen state that there is pain and evil and imperfection in the world, that there is, in fact, darkness. The scribes and prophets and rabbis of the Jews and the scholars and councils and creeds of the church have never said that this imperfection was individualised, so that each person receives exactly what they deserve in this world, in terms of punishment or reward. But it is difficult to get one's head around that, especially when you see that suffering and imperfection is expressed in different way in different individuals. And so, we get people like Job's comforters telling him that even if he can't remember it, he must have sinned dreadfully to be sent his awful suffering. Physical ailments and disabilities were often seen as direct punishment from God on the individual, even when they were visited on a person before birth. Direct cause and effect – it is not how things work, as Jesus affirms, but it is easier to understand.

It still happens. I well remember back in the 1980s when the AIDs pandemic was beginning and people were very frightened, many Christians and churches took the stance that this was a judgment of God on homosexual people. This was said even though very often it was addicts or sex workers or wives of promiscuous husbands and then sadly unborn children who were also being infected. And still are. At that time when there was ignorance and fear about the disease, the reaction of parts of the Church, the part that got the attention, did nothing to dispel the darkness. The doctrine of cause and effect never does, it doesn't dispel darkness, it assigns blame, and it tends to see some people as less human than others.

In the days of the beginning of the Aids pandemic, when people were frightened and apt to rush to judgement, I learned about the full humanity of the victims through one woman. She was a patient in the Chicago hospital where I was doing my chaplaincy training, and one day, when I happened to be the chaplain on call, she asked to see a minister. This patient was kept in isolation, and I was enjoined to dress in plastic gloves and apron and to wear a face mask when I went in – just in case, although by then it had been established that the illness was not passed through the air or by skin to skin contact. Well, I dressed up and went in and spent time with the patient. She had been an addict and forced by her dealer into prostitution, and she was dying; she knew it. We talked and the next day I went back. At the end of the second visit, she asked me if I thought I needed to wear the mask and gloves, and I said that I knew I didn't. So I never wore them again. Then we could shake hands. She knitted me a little bookmark. She asked once if she could kiss my cheek. But what she taught me was by her prayer. At the end of the first visit I asked, as I always did, if she would like me to pray with her, and, as nearly everyone always does, she said yes. So I asked what she would like me to pray for – thinking that she would talk of her condition or her approaching death, or perhaps some long-lost family. But she asked me to pray for those who had got her into this state. Would I pray for those who helped her get addicted, for those who used her body, for whoever it was who infected her. "Love your enemies," said Jesus, "And pray for those who despitefully use you." She was a better follower of Jesus than many who sit in churches, and as such she was more, not less, fully human.

When Jesus healed the man, he was doing more than giving sight, he was also taking away a stigma and restoring his right to be considered a full part of the human race. He was saying that he reverses sin, and the consequences of sin. But he also tells his disciples that this idea of direct causation between one person's sin and their

affliction is rubbish. The world is imperfect and became that way through human action, but it is not as simple as one person's sin leading to one person's consequences. We are tied up together in the bundle of life more tightly than that.

Light dispels darkness. It drives it away and it is no more. And Jesus' light shines on our misconceptions and dispels them, meaning that if we follow him we have to be prepared to have our minds changed – about him, about others, about how the world is and how we should live in it. And he shows us his light by his actions as much as he tells us about it by his words.

"I am the light of the world," said Jesus, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." And then he showed what he meant by associating with those who were thought to be beyond the pale: tax collectors who collaborated with the occupying Roman forces; prostitutes; and those with illness or disability which might mean that they were terrible sinners. I am the light of the world, said Jesus and he showed what he meant by healing the sick and making people whole; by changing behaviours by the power of love and forgiveness.

"Whoever follow me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." It is not just a promise, but also a challenge. If we want to be able to see by the light which is Christ, then we have to follow him. We have to do what he would do, love where and as he would love, forgive as he would and does forgive. At another time, Jesus looked at his followers, who were supposedly learning to be like him and live like him, and said "You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden." (Matthew 5:14) The two truths go together. If we want to walk in the light we have to follow Jesus, and that means that we learn to shine as he does, dispelling darkness and bringing light. And for some of us that may turn out to be dangerous, and for some of us it may mean that there are those who disagree with what we do and who we become, but our calling is to follow and to shine.

Today we will gather around the communion table, and remember that Jesus said that he is the bread of life. Let us remember also that he is the light of the world, and thank him for the light he has, through his followers, shone around the globe for two thousand years. And let us ask for the grace to let his light change us till we too can shine for those who most need the light of God's love. Amen.

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