

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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LIGHT OF THE WORLD

29th July 2018

Isaiah 61:1-5

John 7:37-39, 8:12-20

On Saturday we will be having the Highland Games in Newtonmore. And although Highland games have some things in common with other fair-type gatherings that happen all over the world, they are distinct because they are Highland. Nowhere else will you see a caber tossed, or a hammer hurled; nowhere else, definitely, will you have a haggis-eating competition! And the piping and the dancing, while they may be found in the Scottish diaspora, are all very Highland. If, on Saturday, when all of this was in full swing, someone got hold of the announcer's microphone and proclaimed, "Your focus is too small, you are thinking too local, embrace the world outside of the highlands!" he or she would probably have the mic taken firmly away and after a puzzled silence, the whole thing would go on again, unchanged.

When Jesus said that he was the light of the world, he was making that kind of statement, only more so.

When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," he was speaking to a crowd, who had come seeking him because he had fed the five thousand. When he said, "I am the light of the world" it was in Jerusalem at a festival. These were not small private statements, but large public declarations, for all to hear. They were statements about himself, but because he used the I Am name of God, they were also statements about God, and about how to relate to God, and people found them hard to take.

If we look back in chapter 7 of John's gospel, we find that the festival that Jesus was attending was the autumn festival of booths, Sukkot, as it is known. This was one of the three feasts where Jews were expected to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so it was a big thing, a combination of an end-of-the-harvest celebration and a remembrance of the time of the exodus when they lived in tents – and so Jews, even yet, make booths for Sukkot, eat in them, and sometimes sleep in them. The festival lasts for a week. Jesus had not gone up publicly to the festival. In fact, when his brothers had urged him to go and make a public display of his acts, he had refused, saying that the time for that was not yet come. But then he had gone quietly into the city, and from the middle of the festive week he was to be found in the temple teaching the people and causing the leaders to raise the soon-to-be-familiar questions of who he was and what his authority was.

And then, on the last day of the feast which is the most important, he stood up and declared two things, first of all he said that anyone who was thirsty should come to him for living water that flows from the heart. And John explains that he meant that he would give the Holy Spirit to enliven lives. John shows that there was a lot of discussion about this statement, or about the speaker – people were so often too busy debating Jesus that they had no time to give attention to what he was saying.

But Jesus was not to be deflected from what he was saying and later made another pronouncement: "I am the light of the world."

When we think about Jesus calling himself the light of the world, we are most likely to think about what it means to be light, how we need light, how we would literally be lost without light. We think about the various forms of light that we know, and if we have imagination or have lived in less artificially-lit parts of the world, we remember that Jesus was talking in a time where artificial light was poor, oil lamps may be atmospheric, but the reed and rush lights which most people had do not give much light. We may think about how the dark was dangerous, the hiding place of bandits and robbers, of rapists and murderers. We rejoice that God gives us light and indeed is the light which the world needs, driving away the dark and making life secure. There is nothing at all wrong with doing that.

But what Jesus' first hearers would have heard was a little different. They might well have heard "I am the light of the world" as a rebuke. And the bit that they would have heard loudest would not be the idea of light, but its extension to the world.

The idea of God as light was one that Jesus' people know well. The Jewish Scriptures are full of references to God shining a light, giving light, being light, leading in the dark and so on. The Scriptures also make it clear that the task of God's people Israel, is to bring God's light into all the world. They are to reflect the light of God for everyone. And what Jesus is saying is that they haven't been doing this, and so the mantle of being the light-bearers, the God-carriers has passed from them. "I am the light of the world."

It was worse than having someone try to make a Highland Games more of a world games. It was heresy and anti-national heresy at that.

The people were ending their festival of Sukkot, and Jesus was spoiling it. He was spoiling it by reminding them that they had a purpose which was more than just keeping their heritage alive. Since the return from exile, five hundred years before, Israel had never been a properly independent country. First the Assyrians and then the Greeks and then the Romans had been their overlords, and while sometimes they had been allowed to more or less look after themselves, at other times they had been ruled with a heavy hand, especially since the Greek empire became the Roman empire. The national distinctiveness of Israel, which was rooted in their faith, had been under threat, more or less, for all that time. And so it was understandable that the practice of their religious faith, in the small daily things and in the big festivals, had become a matter of national identity and pride. That is often seen, even in Scotland. And Jesus stood up and effectively said "You have forgotten what you are for: you have forgotten that you are a light for the world. It's not working."

So when we think about this statement of Jesus, and what it says about the I Am who is God, we mustn't only focus on the first part of it, and forget the second. Jesus is telling us (again) that God is light, with all the good that includes and with all that that means for showing up what is wrong in the world and in our lives – because the darkness must be shown up before it can be removed. Light must shine into dark corners so that we can see what is really there and separate the good that we should cherish from the bad that should be destroyed. But Jesus is also telling us that God is light for the whole world, not just one little part of it, and too often that is what God's people need to hear.

Since the beginning of time, not just the beginning of the church, but nothing changed then, the tendency of God's people, because we are human, is to look inward rather than outward and to think small rather than big. The world is a big place and a big concept, and we can't help but think in terms of smaller groupings – families, friends, localities, nations. There are times when thinking in smaller groups is important and good, but when it means that we forget to care about those outside our group, it is to be deplored.

Jesus reminded us that God is the light (which is good) for the whole world. Not just for us, not just for the bits we know or approve. Just as physically God gives light in the sun to all the world, and we do not have to earn the right to see by that light, so God is the light for the world. God is the morality that people embrace, even if they do not know God. God is the good that people do. God is the hope and the love and, yes, the light that is found, even where God is not acknowledged. And Jesus shows us what the light of God is like. Jesus shows us God's love and compassion, God's provision and patience, God's sacrifice and God's endurance. For the world.

When the church is feeling embattled, as the Jews of Jesus' day were feeling embattled, our tendency is to look inward. Our tendency is to preserve what we have and what we think makes us distinctive and forget that our calling is not to be a cosy corner for ourselves. Our tendency is to put up walls and say that only some and not others can come in. Our tendency is to concentrate more and more on the immediate and local – which is our calling, but only part of our calling – and forget about our mission to bring God's light to the world. One of the dangers that our church, the Church of Scotland, currently faces is that as numbers dwindle, we forget that we have a task to do to shine God's light, rather than to maintain what we have in our local parishes and forget those who live beyond the border.

Because that is the next step when we think of Jesus as the light of the world. Jesus himself did not want all the glory of being the light or all the calling of it to reside solely in himself. He also told his followers that they were light for the world. He is the light and his followers are called to reflect that light. We are not called to reflect his light only in some places or only on some days or at some times, but wherever we are and always. We are called to live with compassion and joy and love and invitation, with suffering and endurance and all the aspects of God's light which Jesus showed us and which are the things which change the world.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." As we respond to that invitation, so we also are accepting the call to reflect the light outwards. Amen.

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