

Matthew 5:13-20, Epiphany 5A

A sermon by Mary Matthews, 9th Feb 2020

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”.

When preparing for this sermon I couldn't help but sing hymns like – ‘This little light of mine’.
And also:

“I want to walk as a child of the light
I want to follow Jesus
God set the stars to give light to the world
The star of my life is Jesus.

Chorus:

In Him there is no darkness at all
The night and the day are both alike
The Lamb is the light of the city of God
Shine in my heart Lord Jesus

I want to see the brightness of God
I want to look at Jesus
Clear Sun of righteousness shine on my path
And show me the way to the Father”

Today we will be placing special attention on the biblical theme of light in Matthews gospel taking a look at 3 main points that also coincide with the hymn above:

- God – why is the concept of light important to God in OT and in the creation story?
- We will explore Jesus as the source of light for all humanity. He is God's light in a dark and suffering world.
- Us – what does this means for us and how do we bring salt and light into our lives? Here will be exploring Christian character as I believe the scripture is urging us to live as righteous Christians before God.

Thinking about the biblical topic of light – it occurred to me this week that it is actually a much more important topic that I have ever really imagined before now. That God must highly rate

light above every other topic. Why do I say this? Well, when opening the bible, the very first passage in Genesis says:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Now the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

The First Day – (God very first action)

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness He called “night.”

It also occurred to me that we could have stayed in perpetual darkness, but somehow God decided that light would be a very good thing for us humans.

When thinking about this further, I realized that with this newly created light the gardens in Eden could grow, and these plants could feed the animals, fish, birds and us humans. It is because of light that we have an ecosystem which sustains us to this day. Light via fire was a source of heat to cook and stay warm in the garden of Eden. Light – it turns out is essential for our survival and the planets survival!

If you think of a glorious sunrise or sunset you have seen it can be quite breath taking. No wonder throughout all time people have worshipped the sun as a god. I have often stood watching a sunset, with tears in my eyes at the beauty that God has proved for us. We Christians know that God is not the sun but the Maker of the sun. The maker of this magnificent source of light.

And it turns out that we associate light with God and so do our Jewish friends in the faith. Bright clouds, a burning bush, and a pillar of fire were signs of God's presence for them in the OT.

In the psalms the author wrote “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27:1);

Isaiah promised them, “The LORD shall be your light forever” (Isaiah 60:19). And he also said: “Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you” (Isaiah 60:1).

And the prophet Simeon hailed the child Jesus as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” Not just for the Jews.

Linking the old testament to the new testament we read in the gospel of John about a Jewish Feast of Tabernacles where there is the lighting of four great candelabra in the Court, in memory of God's presence. While at this feast Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, **but will have the light of life**” (John 8:12). The light of life – what does this mean?

It is similar to the analogy of the ‘Bread of Life’ (John 6:35) where Jesus states: “I am the bread of life: he who comes to me shall not hunger”. Jesus claims to possess life that sustains them just as the Father does and provide it to those who follow him.

In the Nicene Creed, we call Jesus “Light from Light.” Have you ever stopped to ask what does this mean?

And in the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. This is one of my favorite services as the church has been stripped on Maundy Thursday and in complete darkness until this point. The vigil opens by lighting a paschal candle from new fire and then we everyone proclaims the light of Christ which has come into the world. The lighting of the candle represents the risen Christ, as a symbol of light and life which dispels darkness and death from our lives.

Getting back to Matthews gospel, just prior to this scene, Jesus had been teaching His famous Sermon on the Mount- The Beatitudes.

Here’s a sample:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus was giving us a helpful clue – that Christians who live out these qualities listed in the Beatitudes (merciful, meek, peacemakers, those who have compassion on the poor and lonely) they **are** the light of the world.

In the teaching the beatitudes Christ was sharing His light with those listening. It’s kind of like a batten race. Jesus was holding out His light, for us to grab a hold of it and run out to share it with all those around us. He was showing the way to live as a light shining not just for ourselves, but to shine on and brighten all those around us. Matthews gospel says “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Example – when have I been merciful? Do I keep a clean heart before God? Do I stand up for those who are being persecuted?

So what does that look like? What does that mean for us?

To live as a light of the world is to know our deepest, truest, and most authentic self is based in 1) Christ's light and life (His truth written in scripture and heard in our heart via the Holy Spirit) and 2) That we wholeheartedly love Jesus. Knowing these two things naturally leads us to want to live holy lives based on the life of Jesus seen in the gospel stories we know and love.

We start to ask ourselves in our daily lives – “What would Jesus do in this situation?” And we go and do it.

Hopefully this is the kind of life we long for, to live a holy life, as this is God's original desire for us to live this way. Jesus wants us grounded in His light as part of our self-identity and also our external 'worldly' identity. Then all around will give thanks to God!

Jesus is the Light of the World, and Jesus is also saying that his disciples (that includes you and me) are also the light of the world.

He was calling His disciples and US to live lives of holiness and righteousness so that WE will shine out in this dark world. Not for our own glory but for the Lords. This is also at the essence of the great Commission. Jesus commanded that we go into all the world and not just to keep our faith to ourselves!

Jesus isn't telling his disciples:

- to let their light shine only when they are with each other.
- Only to other Christians
- Only when they are in a good mood or when they feel like it.
- only to shine amongst “nice” people.

Jesus had a special mission to those who were poor, lonely, sick, and widowed. These are the people we are especially called to “shine upon”.

In other words, He is telling us to let our light shine on those living in dark places. Example - When I worked as a hospital chaplain caring for those in pain, dying, alone.

It may not be your call to be in full-time ministry, but Jesus is telling His disciples and US-

- to let your light shine wherever you are (don't cover it up)

- As a mother, father, brother, sister, wife, husband, neighbor, friend.
- Let your light shine not just for those immediately around you but like a city on a hill – shine in your community, workplace, in your neighborhood and in the Starbucks line waiting for your latte.

This is not easy to do –

Why? Because it takes discipline. It takes discipline and self-control to not speak behind a friend's back, it takes self-control to forgive someone who has hurt you. It is really hard to love people who sometimes seem so unlovable and unkind.

Sometimes in our humanness we want to hate someone or take revenge.

But the gospel today tells us to turn from our old ways, to live in the light so that we can be light – a source of hope and kindness – to be like Jesus to others.

What if we hide our light from the world?

To do so, in some way, denies Christ in ourselves. This is what the text means by saying that 'light that is hidden is worthless'.

If we are light, then we ought to be 'seen' (shine) for those around us. If we are lonely, our relationships are hurtful and we are always grumpy, if our life feels dark and filled with shadows, we can tend to want to hide and cover up our light. I know when times have been difficult, I have wanted to hide away and not see anyone. At these times it can feel like we've forgotten who we are. Maybe we have turned away from our light source – Jesus who is the light of life.

Whether we believe that we are 'light' or not in our heart of hearts – in some ways is beside the point. For Jesus is saying you ARE...

"the light of the world."

With those words Jesus is declaring what already is. He is making a statement of fact. This doesn't mean we must become something we're not already. It means we are to become, live into, and manifest what we already are. That is both the good news and the challenge, to believe and become what we already are. It is some of our most difficult and most important work as Christians.

When living in Boston I spent a lot of time at the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal monastery in Massachusetts. At the Eucharist the priest would proclaim, with his

hands holding the bread and wine (body and blood of Christ) “Behold what you are, become what you see.”

“Behold what you are, become what you see.”

I think that’s what Jesus is saying in today’s gospel. “Behold the light that you already are. Become the light of the world. Let all around you see this.”

Then you will be living the embodiment of Jesus in humanity. “light from light” -God’s light from Jesus’s light from our light... into all the world.

And we can truly say - ‘God is with us!’

Let them see, for you are the light of the world.

Amen.