

I am the light of the world – John 8:12

Different kinds of light

Within the last 24 hours we will have all relied on lights a great deal. Lights have all sorts of uses and meanings. Take driving your car for example. Headlights help you to see where you are going, and help other road users to see you. But also inside the car, the driver is presented with a whole range of warning lights. These are useful to the driver to warn them when action needs to be taken such as you need to fill up with petrol. Traffic lights tell drivers when it is safe to go and when it is not safe.

For an airline lights are even more important. Lights guide the plane onto the runway. Lights such as the one on top of 1 Canada Square at Canary Wharf let planes know where buildings are in the dark. And we all know from the safety talk that is given at the start of every passenger flight, that in an emergency, passengers will be able to follow the lights to the safety of the exit.

Jesus, the light of the world

In the passage we have just read, Jesus said “I am the light of the world”. But why did Jesus say this and what did he mean? What kind of light is he?

This is another one of Jesus’ εγω ειμι (I am) sayings (εγω ειμι το φως του κοσμου) which actually translates as ‘I I am the light of the world’ (the word ‘I’ appearing twice for emphasis). As with the other ‘I am’ sayings which we have looked at in recent weeks, this is Jesus making it clear that he is talking about himself. Our English equivalent would really be ‘I *myself* am...’

What did Jesus mean?

The context of the passage tells us a lot about what Jesus meant by saying “I am the light of the world”.

John gives us some big clues as to what Jesus was getting at. At the end of the passage, John tells us clearly that Jesus was teaching in the temple. Why was he there? If we go back a chapter to the start of Chapter 7 we see that this was part of the Jewish ‘Feast of Tabernacles’, also called the ‘Feast of Booths’ or the ‘Feast of Shelters’ because the people had to make a shelter which they had to

live in for the week long festival. The feast was instituted by God himself and is explained in Leviticus 23:33-43.

Towards the end of the description it says: “All native-born Israelites are to live in booths 43 so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt.” (Lev 23:42-43)

So you can see that the shelters or booths were to commemorate the Israelites living in booths when the Lord brought them out of Egypt.

As we know the temple in Jerusalem was a very big place. But John helps us out there too by giving us even more specific information about where exactly in the temple Jesus was. Again in John 8:20 John tells us Jesus was “near the place where the offerings were put”. This could only be referring to one place, the court of the women. In the court of the women, you would find 13 boxes. Seven were for people to pay their temple tax, the other six were for freewill offerings. So this is most likely what is meant by John when he says ‘where the offerings were put’.

Ok so what is significant about that? Well, at this time the court would not be filled with women but with men. The women would be separated from the men by balconies that were put up for the festival. This not only helped to separate the men and women but it also meant they could get more people in. As part of the ceremony on the last day, two things happened. The first is that water was drawn from the pool of Siloam and was poured on the altar. Many say that this was the context in which Jesus said “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink” (John 7:37). The second thing was that huge lamps were lit at night. Apparently, these were 50 amos high. I had to look up what an amos was and apparently it is a temple measurement also know as a cubit. If you do a google search on cubit it will tell you that 1 cubit = 45.72 centimetres or 1.5 feet. So if all that is correct then these lamps were 22 meters or 75 feet high. Now apparently it was the job of the junior priests to climb up the ladder to light them. (as a trainee myself, I feel for them). It is recorded that these lamps were so bright that they lit every courtyard in Jerusalem.

And it was in this context that Jesus said “I am the light of the world”. Imagine the impact that would have had. You couldn’t have had a much better visual aid could you? There are lots of theories as to what Jesus meant by saying he was the light of the world in this context. Some say that the light that filled the temple was to symbolise the presence of God and that Jesus was saying he *is* the presence of God. Throughout the Bible light is used to symbolise

God's presence. Another theory is that Jesus was speaking into the situation of the lamps illuminating the whole area. One article I read states that women could see well enough to count grain at night in their own courtyard. Coupled with the event in Chapter 9 after Jesus left the temple, when he healed a blind man, it could be that Jesus was saying he enables people to see clearly. George Beasley Murray argues that in the context of the whole festival, the Jews would have been mindful of the way in which God brought the Israelites out Egypt, leading them with a pillar of fire by night.

Conclusion

I actually think that all of these points are valid. And they all go to show that we need to follow Jesus who is the light and stay close to him. If we don't stay close to the light then we will be in darkness. Imagine if you were walking with someone at night down a dark country lane and the person you are with has a torch. If you follow them, you will know you are safe because the light in front of you will guide you safely. But if you decide to go off on your own, you will be in the dark and won't be able to see clearly.

It's the same with Jesus. As Jesus said, "[whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life](#)". Sometimes we want to be in the dark because staying in the dark hides a lot of things. Stepping into the light can be a little uncomfortable. You see when we step into the light of Jesus, we start to notice things that we perhaps didn't see before. It exposes our sinful nature. This is perfectly natural and it's part of the process. It's like when the sunlight shines through the window and you can suddenly see how much dust there is on the mantelpiece. It would be stupid to deal with that by closing the curtains wouldn't it? Of course we don't close the curtains, we get a duster and wipe off the dust. In the same way, we should view the light that Jesus brings as a positive thing as it highlights our need for repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus left the Holy Spirit with us and it is him who pricks our conscience when we are not going God's way. It's like a light comes on and we see how messy things are. It's not so nice is it when the light shows up the dirt and dust? But it is necessary to start the cleaning process. You see, God wants to make us better people. He wants us to be like a mirror that reflects his glory. But we are all covered in dirt and dust, and dusty mirrors don't reflect very well.

Jesus is the one who enables us to see clearly, he brings illumination. He not only shows us our faults but he is an example of how we should live. He goes before us showing us the way. So in that way

also he is a guiding light for us just as the pillar of fire was for the Israelites. The pillar of fire led the Israelites to the promised land. Those who follow in the light of Jesus have the promise of eternal life.

So let's get close to Jesus, get rid of the dust and let's follow him. If he moves we need to move with him because when we follow him, we will no longer be in the darkness of our sin but will be walking safely in his light that leads us to eternal life with him.