

Reading:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Sermon

You know something, I might very wrong but I think more than ever this year with more and more Christmas decorations going up early, bringing light and joy into what can only be described as a depressing year, I'm guessing that Northern Ireland Electricity will already be seeing the signs of power surges. They're probably now preparing to get more coal into the power stations to generate more electricity (or I assume that's how it's done). You might be thinking it's far too early to put up the Christmas lights, but Psychologists say that it actually makes us all happier. It's the colours in Christmas Decorations that triggers those happy hormones. Chromotherapy, or colour therapy is thought to increase energy levels and boost happiness, might be at play. And everywhere around us, lights are going up. I wonder have you seen the display at both of our churches that came on this weekend? If not make sure to have a drive past and I pray it brings joy to you in these dark days.

This is a season full of light. Especially after the clocks going back, we seem to be amassed in darkness. We go to school and work in the dark, we come home in the dark. So light shining in the darkness of winter can really lift us. This year can be considered as a very dark year – we have seen much more illness and death than ever before in our life time. People are frightened. Families won't get a chance to see each other. Elderly relatives in Nursing Homes have

become so isolated with no visits. It is a tough time, and therefore seeing the lights coming on all around our streets gives a boost to all of us I think.

Now have you noticed how some families will go much further than lights on the Christmas tree – they really go crazy with the lights around their houses. But lights are not just for effect. Lights are symbolic. And from the history of when lights were used at Christmas, Christians typically would put little candles out, to say that the light has entered into human history in the person of Jesus Christ, illuminating the darkness. He has come to shine bright into our hearts. He has come to change the world, and to change us individually. Our Advent Candles being lit from this Sunday onwards in our churches remind us that the light of Christ brings hope in our darkness.

The passage from Isaiah is so well known at this time of year. This is a prophecy of what will happen when the Messiah comes. As usual we are very familiar with those words ‘and he shall be called Wonderful Counsellor...’ but I think we often skip over the opening words, “The people who walked in darkness”. If we don’t understand what it means by darkness, we won’t understand the good news of seeing a great light.

We have got to understand what Isaiah means about people walking in darkness. There’s a theme running through the chapters of Isaiah, where God is calling his people to return to him. In chapter 2 Isaiah instructs the people “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” and then we see in Chapter 5 that they are people who “call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness”. Of the things that are dark, the world in Isaiah’s day is saying that that’s good, and the things that are good the world is opposing. But things are no different today. When we as Christians try to stand up for what Scriptures state, we are opposed, meanwhile more and more liberal views creeping in to society are now considered as good and normal.

The leadup to Christmas announces that although we are made to walk in the light of God, humanity around us is walking in darkness. We all need light to see where we are going. Darkness is not just a place where we fall, but it is a place where people hide and get up to things that no one can see them do.

Darkness is everywhere. In this past week I was appalled, as were many other church leaders, when the UK Government decided in its budget to reduce its Foreign Aid spend to countries in need by £4 billion pounds. This is why poverty is still an issue even though the world has plenty of resources and

wealth to address it. And I wait to see how fairly the new virus will be distributed, in particular to those poorest countries in the world with no sanitation while the west will have the budget to buy millions of doses.

Life today is tough, probably tougher than many of us have ever experienced. And this is the weight which Isaiah brings when he says, “The people who walked in darkness” But how did the people respond to this darkness in his day. Listen to what he says in Chapter 8. The people “consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter. Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness”.

Isaiah is saying on the lead up to chapter 9, that people will look to humanity to fix the world’s problems. Here’s what pastor Tim Keller says about this, “Yes they say, we are in darkness, but we can overcome it ourselves. People make the same claim today. Some look more to the state, some more to the stock markets, and everyone looks to technology. Yet they share the identical assumption. Things are dark but we believe we can end the darkness with intellect and innovation”

But that has been proven wrong, because it doesn’t seem to be improving, does it. The reality is that on our own we cannot defeat the darkness. And this is where Isaiah doesn’t leave us this Christmas on our own, in the dark nights of Christmas to fumble and trip, to wonder how we are going to do with all that 2020 has brought, he brings us good news. Let’s read verse 2 in its entirety again.

The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

What a wonderfully encouraging image as we begin this Advent season in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. It doesn’t say that people bring light into the world. It says that they see a great light. In other words, in the brokenness of this world, God invades our darkness and he will bring the light and life that we so desperately need today. God invades as Messiah in the most unexpected way. He doesn’t come in the way the people of his time expected. And yet he does come to destroy. He comes to destroy the darkness that can lead us to despair in 2020. Incarnation – God is with us.

At the weekend we were experimenting with the lights around the churches, and we kept having to step back onto the road to see if they were in any way noticeable to passers-by. But the light we are talking about in Isaiah is not faint. This is Joy to the World, that the whole world notices. This is light that transforms the injustices, the plight of human trafficking, the issues of Covid, the confusion of Stormont. This is a light folks that invades all of this.

Isaiah goes on in verse 7 to blow us away. ‘Of the greatness of his government and peace’, Isaiah says, ‘there will be no end’. He is saying that when the light shines in the darkness, things will get better and better, it’s an increase that never ends. And even though many Jews at the time would not have considered a baby in a manger to be the long expected Messiah that would bring an end to all darkness, 33 years later as this Messiah would hang on the cross and take the weight of the world in his body, it was clear that the darkness was extinguished for good.

Folks, when the light of Jesus comes into the darkness, it tells us that Christmas is the beginning of the end of sin, the beginning of the end of death, the beginning of the end of suffering and evil.

And so finally what does this light look like as we move to verse 6?

Isaiah writes 700 years before Jesus comes, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”.

So a child brings the light, because he is the light of the world. But this Child is also called Mighty God. Jesus as Paul says to the church in Colossae is fully God and fully man. Jesus is not a poor second, or a part reflection of who God is. That’s why in John 8 he says “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”

All these great things are going to happen as the light shines in the darkness. Jesus is the wonderful counsellor. He’s wonderful because unlike going to someone who will not fully understand what you are going through in life, Jesus understands. With Jesus, there’s nothing you could go through that he hasn’t gone through himself. On the cross Jesus knows what it’s like to be abandoned. As God in human form, he knows our pain.

He's called an everlasting Father. What does a good Father do for his children? He protects them from all harm, even at great cost to himself. So when Jesus is an everlasting Father, he is protecting his kids, to the extent of dying for them so that they have the future inheritance.

And he's called our prince of peace. He's come to bring the peace that we long for in this world, and we so desperately need it.

Folks, this Advent, don't miss out what Isaiah is saying what Jesus has given. Even in the mess of this COVID Christmas, we light the first advent candle today reminding us of the hope that comes from this unexpected Messiah.

Towards the end of the book of Isaiah in Chapter 60 it says to arise and shine because your light has come. He is such a bright light that we won't need anything else. Jesus is bright enough to illuminate any darkness, even a COVID Christmas, and that's why this Christmas we are lighting our churches up to remind you of this. Remember that this child grew into a man, and in order to illuminate our lives, he had to enter into utter darkness. The only way that Jesus could illuminate your darkness was experiencing the darkness of the cross. Do you know that when Jesus was on the cross there was utter darkness across the land. He had to take the darkness that we have brought and carried, and take it for himself. That's why Jesus endured the utter darkness so that you can have light. When you realise this, you will receive him truly as a gift. You will entrust yourself to him in everything, you will stop putting your hope on all the things that frankly this year has proven are worth nothing really. We can begin to see the first signs of a breakthrough with this virus, but I wonder have you used this different kind of year to completely entrust yourself on Jesus, knowing that all darkness will run away and never come back. Trust him and follow him. Tell others this Christmas about his light that you have rediscovered, because that's all that will deal with the issues, the worry, the pain of this life. Nothing but the light of Jesus this Christmas will extinguish the mess most people walking in darkness continue to carry around. Every time you go past our churches this Christmas and see the lights, use it to remind you to go tell others of the light this Christmas, and the Hope of the Messiah.

Revd Jonny