

Over recent years I think we have all seen a greater abundance of people purchasing lights for their homes at Christmas. In fact it was last Christmas when Alison and Nathan took a night during Christmas to drive around some of the houses in Ballyclare to look at their amazing Christmas displays. And even the church here has not missed out on the opportunity to have some coloured spotlights shining against the buildings at this time of the year.

The word 'light' is an amazing word and a very helpful word to use to describe Jesus as we see today in our Gospel reading, because we all know what light is and we have got used to having light around us. There obviously was a time when that wasn't so. Before the 1800s in London if you had a bit of money about you, you might have paid a boy to walk ahead of you with a stick with tar on it which was lit. It was quite a dangerous job for these boys but it was only the wealthy could enjoy that privilege.

However, in 1807, a man called Frederick Windsor decided that he wanted to do something special to celebrate the birthday of King George III. He was going to do it by setting up gas lamps piped all along Pall Mall and he organised it so that the minute he lit the spark, all the gas lamps along the street would come on as they were fed with a pipe under the ground. There were thousands of people there to look at the gas lamps and in time they put them all across London. People could finally walk outside at night because the light kept everyone safe. There was a popular newspaper at the time called the Westminster Review and it said that the introduction of gas lamps had done more to reduce immorality and criminality on our streets than all the sermons that were ever preached.

It's true about the power of light – we know that there are more things morally wrong done in the shadows than there are out in the open. There's something about light that exposes things that people would rather hide.

The writer of our Gospel today, John, understands fully the issue of light and its power. And in what has to be one of the most incredible literary passages, John explores many themes including that Jesus is both life and light to all. John says in verse 4, 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people'. The Greek term for life here is 'zoe'. Now there are different words for life, but this *zoe* isn't life that we would describe in our breathing – *zoe* is a spiritual life. It is the abundant life that is available to us in Christ. Apart from Jesus we cannot experience this spiritual life, and without it we are nothing more than a breathing machine that lives and then dies. One of the first statements that is posed at the Alpha course is this one – 'There's got to be more to life than this'. And through COVID I have had my fair share of seeing physical lives end to emphasise that there's got to be more to life than this. Over this past week we have gathered together as families and celebrated. We've probably had our fair share of food and drink, and we've probably all received presents of one kind or another. And yet I think all of us understand that all of this whilst enjoyable, doesn't provide long term satisfaction. As life goes on from one year to the next, as you might accumulate wealth, do well in your career, have a family around you, still nothing in this world fully satisfies. The writer Solomon, who had so much wealth, describes life this way in Ecclesiastes "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun". (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11)

CS Lewis said “That if we go through this life, and nothing in this world satisfies our desires, then the most reasonable explanation is that we were made for another world.’ And that is the case after all the searching - Jesus is offering true life to all that would receive, and that life is filled with light and hope. And so throughout the Gospels the light that Jesus brings is described 78 times. John wants us to know today that Jesus is light and life, and he wants all of us to welcome it.

Second, John wants us to know that Jesus reveals God’s goodness to us through his life but it also shows the darkness of this world – verses 5 & 9. ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’.

Jesus reveals the truth of God, the goodness of God, the love of God in the midst of what otherwise would seem dark. Through everything that Jesus did, we discover just how good God is to us. Even as Jesus volunteers himself to go to the cross for our sins he shows the goodness of God. And so when any of us are going through a difficult season of life, all we have to do is look to the cross and there will be revealed just how good God is to us – he could have rejected us after we killed him on the cross but instead he tells us that he would not leave us as orphans. That has to be the pinnacle of God’s love to us, that he was willing to come into our world – Immanuel – to lead a perfect life, to be a perfect offering for our sins, so that we could be reconciled with God, and that we might live with him for eternity. Jesus is the moral perfection of what God is all about. Jesus illuminates the way to his Father, and shows us how we can stay on that path. His word is a lamp onto our feet. But remember that by illuminating the way for us, it does reveal to us our own sin. There’s no point in having a cosy picture of the baby in the manger if we don’t understand why the baby came. He came to bridge the gap between a holy God and the ugliness of our own sin. So often we tend to view our sin relative to other people’s sins. So we think that this sin isn’t as bad as what someone else has done. So God’s view is that he sees the ugliness of it, and therefore his light reveals the stuff that is hidden. We might wonder how that fits in to his goodness – well it’s because he is good that he is willing to show a way in which we can still receive the light that he offers to our lives.

But let me encourage you rather than make us all feel on this first Sunday of a New Year that we are a pack of lousy sinners. You see the goodness that God reveals through Jesus brings a warmth to us in our need. It brings comfort. When we go through tough times we need to know that someone cares, and I think the Christmas holidays with the long dark days plus the isolation that comes from the pandemic makes things even more difficult. Many people have lost loved ones in the past year, there are many who are experiencing loneliness, frustration, fear, hopelessness, depression – it can be so difficult. But the presence and goodness of Jesus comforts us. We discover all the way the sufficiency of Jesus – that he is enough. As we reach out more and more to people through our Compassion ministries, I hear more and more stories of people who realise that when they feel at their lowest, when they feel as though no one cares, that God’s people who represent the light of Christ show them that God still loves them even when things seem so dark.

So God offers us true life and light, his light reveals his goodness to us, and then finally, as we read verses 6-8 we see that Jesus uses those who serve him to reveal more about him to others. So here the Apostle John introduces us to John the Baptist who was the forerunner or the messenger to prepare the way for Jesus’ coming. John’s message was to urge people to repent – change your thinking about God, change your thinking about sin, and come and be restored by God. Some people thought that John was the Messiah himself, but John kept pointing people to Jesus, not himself. The apostle John made it clear in these 3

verses that John the Baptist's role was to point people to Jesus – '1. He came as a witness to testify to the light, 2. he himself was not the light, 3. he came to testify to the light'. John knew what his mission was – chapter 3:30 John says "he must become greater; I must become less". And that's the same mission that God has called all of, his followers to, we are to make him greater in our daily lives as we become less. He becomes greater as we show his light. Jesus said that his followers are called to reflect his light. At the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew's Gospel he says to his followers (so that includes you and me); "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others" (Matt 5:14-16). Let people see your actions that bring glory to our Father in heaven.

Jesus brings us true life and light, he offers us the goodness of God, and he wants us to shine for him daily.

So reflecting on his reading, how can we reflect his love and light in 2022?

Firstly it might seem obvious – you've got to follow him. We are to place our faith in him alone – we learn from him and we yield to his ways. Until you submit to him, then you will not be able to reflect his light. That means you have got to draw close to him. So what does that mean for us as a Church, well I've said over two recent Christmas sermons that we can be really good at our programmes and events as a parish, but unless we are personally drawing close to God it means absolutely nothing. Let me give you a practical example of that. Say we run an event that brings people along from our community – everybody loves it, it gathers much publicity. But unless we have a plan for what happens next to these people, then all it is is another event. We definitely need people who are good at organising these functions, but if we don't have people with a heart to talk about Jesus to our community then all we are doing is running another community event, and frankly spending money on the glitzy stuff that everyone likes. Now don't get me wrong, I believe fully in the engagement with our community, but Jesus said we are the light of the world. Therefore we must share his light with people, we must draw people closer to him and like a forerunner point them to Jesus. And therefore if we are not drawing closer to him ourselves then we won't have the heart to draw others close.

Therefore in this year ahead, what are you going to do to draw close to him? Well firstly I have to emphasise the need to be regular in your worship. And folks if you are here today but your spouse or children are not, then with prayer and Godly guidance work this year and bringing them back into this family. COVID has done a lot of damage, but it's now time to rebuild. We need people back. Next I'd encourage you to engage in bible learning – find people who are wanting to grow more in God's word together. Find people that you can pray with who desire to seek more of God's will for their lives. And if you need me to help you find people I'd be more than happy to. Next, spend time in solitude with God – we spend a huge portion of our day attached to one type of electronic device or other interests. But every moment that we spend more on these devices, or a hobby, or our work, or whatever it is, then that is what commands our lives, and therefore that becomes your God. Your life will then reflect what you spend most of your time at. So let's determine to consider spiritual disciplines to draw close to God so that in our daily lives as we interact with others we reflect something of what is actually feeding us.

So that's following him. But the second way I'd suggest is to check on the brightness of your light. In our Living Room we have a couple of small table lamps that we switch on every evening. We very rarely would put on the main light in the room because we prefer the

room to be more subtly lit, and our eyes have become well-adjusted to the level of light. However when people are over at the house, some comment on how little light there is in the room – that they have problems seeing things. So what happens is that we adjust to the brightness in our surroundings, and we may fail to check the brightness, but others might notice that the brightness is missing. In this time of holidays, this is a great time to check your spiritual brightness. It is the greatest time to receive the greatest gift of all and that is Jesus. Today at the start of a New Year we have the opportunity either for the first time or to re-engage again with the life and light that Jesus truly offers and all that he has designed for you to be in 2022. Let's commit to reflecting more of his light in our lives in this coming year – there is nothing more important than this.

Let's take a moment of prayer. I pray that if anyone is gathered here today Lord who has not yet received you as Lord and Saviour, that they may receive that greatest gift this Christmas from you. And I pray Lord that we may all in this year ahead discover that life that truly and only satisfies, that brings contentment in you. In the quietness of your heart right now, you can make that decision for the first time – just be honest in how you are feeling and surrender yourself to him – the light of the world. And for those of us Lord who have already made that decision, I pray that we will assess our brightness in being faithful messengers of you Lord, and that we may return to understand your purposes, and that we may shine your light in amongst our friends and colleagues. This I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.