

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON 2021 – LIGHT & LIFE!

So last Sunday, I talked about how one of the standout features of this Christmas story, is the Divine visitations by the angels. How they came with revelations to ordinary people in their everyday lives. But they came with the extraordinary message ... “God’s redeeming, healing purposes are now ‘breaking in’ to a broken world, in Christ... Glad tidings! And you Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph and The Shepherds have a crucial part to play in these purposes.” Well tonight, we celebrate the astonishing impact these events had on the entire history of humanity. We celebrate, that this CHRISTmas story is still unfolding. We celebrate the truth, that you and I, in all the beauty and brokenness of our own lives, can also play a part in God’s redeeming, healing purposes. This is both the beauty and the hope of our faith.

Tonight, I want to open up another standout theme of this whole Christmas Story. Because everywhere we look, be it in Holy Scripture or the Christmas carols, you will see the truth of this dominant theme. Listen again to these epic words from John’s Gospel and see how many times you recognise this truth being emphasised?

4 In Christ is life, and this life is the LIGHT for all humankind. 5 This LIGHT shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He himself was not the LIGHT; he came only as a witness to the LIGHT. 9 The true LIGHT that gives LIGHT to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize this light. I think there’s no mistaking what this whole night is about.

9 The true LIGHT that gives LIGHT to everyone, HAS come g into this world.

EIGHT times we get the confirmation that this is what we’re celebrating. And every Christmas carol sings about it. Silent night, Holy night - Son of God, love's pure light. O COME ALL Ye faithful - God of God, Light of Light - O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM - Yet in the dark street shineth, Thy everlasting light.

But before I go any further, I want to capture the sense of all this, with a video by the people of Alpha. Because it really captures this central cosmic significance of LIGHT, described in John’s gospel. And it captures the relationship between LIGHT and LIFE and the Christ child. Sit back and enjoy ... **SHOW VIDEO**

What I love about that video is the way it visually captures the centrality of LIGHT and how everything emanates from it. And it really got me thinking more deeply about the whole concept of LIGHT. How scripture portrays it. How you and I understand it. How we intuitively recognise and reach out for Light.

In the beginning says scripture, God said, let there be light. Well science and physics now shows us very clearly that Genesis had it spot on. Light is fundamental to the universe and ALL existence. Right down to the quantum level of photons and their wave particles.

What is it that enables life on this planet to even exist? Well it’s the Sun bringing the light and heat which allows all life to flourish. And yet the Sun is only one of billions of blazing balls of starlight generating their own light and heat. But all Created by the one true author of ALL LIFE.

And think about how often we use light in our own language to express many different concepts.

- **We associate Light with Hope.** The light at the end of the tunnel. Light breaking into the darkness
- **We associate light with the spirit of Joy.** We talk about people who have a light and a spark about them. They can light up a room with their presence

Conversely, when people are sadly struggling with depression, we can say the light seems to have gone from them. There's no light in their eyes.

We connect Light with clarity. We talk about the need to cast light on a situation.

- **And we associate light with wisdom.** When people have the presence of divine illumination, we call them enlightened. And central to OUR calling, is to grow deeper in this divine illumination. Think of the words of St Paul in Ephesians **1:18** **"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which God has called you"**

And finally, we have the Magi, who represent wisdom in the Christmas story following the LIGHT of a star in search of WHAT? The one true light, the light of Christ coming into the world. Again as the carol sings... Guide us to thy perfect light. And from all of this we can see why the metaphor of Light for Jesus Christ has such profound significance and implications for all things.

Now I find all of this, deeply profound. **But it does put before all of us, the eternal question.** What difference should this profound truth about the light of Christ coming into the world make, to how we live out the small details of our lives. Because the Christmas story is about the eternal but also the everyday. The cosmic and the commonplace.

So let's just go back to those epic words from John's gospel for a few moments and unpack the truth of the central verse. **Verse 4 ...In Christ is life, and this life is the LIGHT for all humankind.**

When I first came to faith, it was **this truth** that struck me most. What do I mean by this? Well as I looked at the LIFE of Christ, his teachings, the way he treated people, the way he was prepared to sacrifice his own **life** for the Law of love and the Gospel of peace, it really did **light up** something in me. As my favourite carol sings... **till he appeared and the soul felt it's worth.** I'd been feeling the need for something 'more' for many years, but when I saw the LIFE of Christ... for the first time in a long time, my soul began to feel its true worth. I recognised a light in Christ, that illuminated more clearly what it means to be truly human.

And if people ever say to me... "why Christ Josh"? I say to them "well for one thing, how different do you think this world would look, if this life of Christ was lived out more?" Would we see the **LIFE in all its fullness** that Christ promised? Not as health, wealth and prosperity, but as in people aspiring to live more fully, the ways of dignity, courage and compassion. People aspiring to recognise more fully, the sacred worth and value of the created order. People aspiring (as the author Anne Lamott said) **to never give up on goodness.** Never give up on goodness, because Christ never gives up on our goodness.

But I have one final question for all of you, for 2021. When you look at the LIFE of Christ, why do you think that this life has been so compelling for so many, down the centuries?

Is it because Jesus knew what darkness and despair felt like?

So we see a life that's completely grounded in the rawness of our own human condition. Its completely authentic and we respond to this.

Jesus knew what it felt like to suffer injustice. He knew what it felt like to suffer betrayal, even by his closest friends. He knew what it felt like to feel utterly forsaken. But this is the same Christ who then said ... **"I am the LIGHT of the World., follow Me"**. The same Christ who then said to everyone who would listen.... Matthew 5 **14-16 You are here to be light bearers, so go out and bring out the God-colours and God flavours in this world.** Because this light will shine in the darkness and this darkness cannot and will not, ever overcome it. The thrill of hope, as the weary world rejoices.

So as we all come to the end of what's been a very challenging year, that I know has taken many of us to places of darkness, let's respond in worship with one of the most beautiful and inspiring of all the carols as our prayer for 2022.

As we gathered last week as choir and orchestra to record these enduring angel songs of hope, there were so many highlights to the evening. One of our musicians came into the church and broke into tears. She said she was overcome by being back in the church and belonging to a worshipping community in Christ. And there was one special moment that brought a tear to my eyes. On this carol 'O Holy Night', all of us came together as one. It was the only carol that featured us all. The cellos, violins, flutes, recorder, keyboards, guitar, drums and the stirring sounds of the organ. All of us, as one voice, singing and playing the eternal song of Christ. That Christ came to dwell among us, full of grace and truth, so that we can be a people, who never give up on goodness. Because we have seen the kind of life that truly brings light to all humankind.