**The Light of the World**
**John 8:12**

Now how would you describe yourself? 'I am…' what? I am British? Or French or Swiss or Dutch? I am male, or female? I'm single, or married? I'm a teacher or a project manager? I asked one of my daughters that question, 'how would you describe yourself, 'I am…'?' And she replied, 'confused'! I think it was a particularly bad day! But how you fill in the blank of 'I am…. ' is an attempt to define who you are, and what you are isn't it; it's about your identity.

And over the summer we're looking at the famous 'I am' sayings of Jesus in John's gospel. Because if it matters how you and I define ourselves, think how much more it matters to you how God defines himself – who and what he is. And last week Andy took us through Jesus saying 'I am the bread of life.' Today, we're going to look at John 8, where Jesus says, 'I am the Light of the World.'

**John 7:37-39; 8:12, 20**

**The Light of Life**
Now if like us you live out in the country you'll know that this past week harvest has well and truly begun. And for the next however many days the farmers are going to be working like crazy from dawn 'til dusk until it's all in. And only once it is all in will they be able to sit back and enjoy it. And I tell you that because the feast Jesus is at is the Feast of Ingathering – it's the harvest festival, where the people celebrated the harvest and provision of food for another year.

But that wasn't the only reason they were feasting and celebrating. You see, the Feast of Ingathering was also combined with the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles – where the people remembered how God had led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. And just like observant Jews still do, the people would spend the week of the feast living in tents or booths, as a reminder of how their ancestors had lived those forty years in the desert.

But according to the writings of the Jewish rabbis at the time, two symbolic things happened during this feast that made it special. First, every day priests would go to the well of Siloam and fill great pitchers with water. And then they would carry those pitchers back to the Temple and pour the water out at the foot of the altar of sacrifice until water ran in rivers over the ground. And they did that as a graphic reminder of how God had provided water from the rock in the wilderness, saving the people from death by thirst. So, when John tells us that Jesus stood up on the last day of the feast and said, chapter 7:37, 'If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink' and 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' the people had this powerful image fresh on their minds, of water pouring out.

But the second thing that made this feast was that at the end of the first day, four enormous, 75-feet high beacons were set up, and lit, in the Court of Women in the Temple. And the Jewish writers say that at night the whole city of Jerusalem glowed in the light of these giant candlesticks. And so, just as the water poured out reminded the people of God providing water from the rock, so those giant beacons served as a vivid reminder of how God had led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom.

And once those beacons were lit, on every subsequent night of the feast, the writers tell us that crowds of people gathered under the light of those beacons, and sang and danced and celebrated, partying late into the night.

Now you might hear that and think, 'all very interesting, but what has that got to do with me?'. Well, look at chapter 8v20, where John tells us, 'these words [Jesus] spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple.' And the treasury was located in the Court of Women. So when Jesus stands in the temple, at the Feast of Booths, and says in v12 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' he was standing under these same giant beacons that lit up the feast and the city.

And that tells you what Jesus means when he says that if you follow him you will have the light of life. You see, this Feast remembered the people of Israel being brought through the desert, being led by a pillar of fire, as God brought them out of slavery and into the freedom of the Promised Land. So when Jesus talks of the light of life, he's talking of the light of salvation and deliverance – the light that rescues us from slavery and brings us out into true freedom. A freedom from sin and oppression and fear. As the psalmist says in Psalm 27:1, 'The Lord *is my light* and my salvation, whom shall I fear?' He's talking of a light that guides us through the wilderness of life and protects us from every wrong turn that would end in death. He's talking about the light of God's presence that never leaves us, but always goes before us. And he's talking of a light that brings joy and singing and dancing and celebration even in the night, even in the dark times, when suffering and death stalk us.

And don't you just need that kind of light? You see, to thrive and grow plants need light. And if they don't get it, they end up pale and shrivelled and stunted. And the same is true for our hearts and inner lives isn't it? We need light. We need the light of joy and dancing when life is dark; we need the light that guides us through life and rescues us from wrong turns; we need the light of God's loving presence accompanying us; we need a light that delivers us from slavery to sin and from fear. And we need that for all of life – the whole span of our lives, not just for a seven-day feast. We all need the light of life.

The question is, where can you get that kind of life-light? And, especially, where can you get the *real* thing in a world of counterfeits?

**The Darkness of Death**

Now just think about the implications of Jesus saying that if you follow him you will not walk in darkness. One implication of that is that unless and until you *do* follow him, you *are* walking in darkness. That we're like people stumbling around in the dark, in the wilderness of life, parched for water, with no light to guide us.

And that image of life being darkness without God's guiding and protecting presence is used time and again in the Bible. Putting it positively, David says in Psalm 23, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will

fear no evil, for you are with me' (Ps 23:4). And David's point is that there is such a thing as the valley of the shadow of death, and sooner or later we must all walk through it. Then, in talking of the coming Messiah, Isaiah says, 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone' (Is 9:2). And so again, the implication is that without this Light of Life, without the light of the Messiah dawning on us, we are like those who walk through life in the dark. Now, if you've ever tried to walk in the dark, or get out of bed and out of the bedroom in the middle of the night, without turning the light on, and without waking your husband or wife up, you know how perilous walking in the dark can be.

And it's not just the Old Testament writers who saw it that way; the New Testament writers do too – and life outside of God is described as darkness, and coming to know him as coming into the light. And in Acts 26:18, when Paul describes his own conversion, he remembers how God called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, 'to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they might receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' So it is not just ancient Israelites who sit oppressed in the darkness of slavery, but everyone sits under the oppressive powers of darkness until God brings them into the light of his presence.

Now, whilst the Bible describes life as like walking in the dark, you also know from experience that that is what life can be like. Things are not going the way you want and a shadow can fall over your life; and when things get really bad, you can feel the darkness of despair setting in. Then there is a kind of darkness that comes with doubt or confusion, and you don't know what you should believe or who you should trust. Or if you go through serious sickness or financial worry or the breakdown of a relationship, life can seem pretty bleak and it can feel as if you are stumbling around in the dark. Then there's a darkness that comes when some sin has a grip of your heart and there's this area of your life that you just can't get freedom in and whilst to those on the outside all might seem sunshine and smiles, you know on the inside that there is a shadow, a darkness over your heart.

But if that kind of darkness is not bad enough, the most profound darkness is that of not knowing God – the darkness that comes with spiritual ignorance. And it is that spiritual blindness that John Newton, the former slave trader, talks about in his famous hymn Amazing Grace: 'I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.' But what's interesting is that Jesus says that spiritual blindness is far wider than you think. You see, in the chapter that follows, Jesus he heals a man who has been blind from birth, but in doing so he points out the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. These are guys who think they know God, but in reality they are blind guides leading others into a pit.

So, whilst you can be spiritually blind because you care nothing for the things of God, Jesus says you can also be highly religious, you can pray and read the Bible and go to church and teach others, and still be blind. You can still miss what God is up to in Jesus.

But the problem with our spiritual blindness, or the darkness that comes when life is hard, or sin has us in its grip, is that we are prone to following false lights.

When I was a boy I spent nearly every weekend in the Spring and Summer on board my parents small yacht. And when my father got his courage up, we would sail across the English Channel to France. Except typically my father getting his courage up happened at night, surrounded by his drinking friends, in the Yacht Club bar. And to sail in the dark, at night, you're dependant on the harbour lights and the lights on the marker buoys showing you safe passage into and out of harbour. But imagine if someone moved those lights – and instead of leading you to safe harbour they led you onto the rocks. All the time you think these lights you're following are your friends, when in actual fact they are leading you to disaster.

And in the darkness of this world there are a thousand false lights that seem to offer you the light of life – that suggest that they will bring you joy and freedom and direction and purpose to your life. And they offer to be your pillar of fire leading you through the desert of life; your channel marker buoys leading you to safe harbour. But in reality they are false lights leading you onto the rocks.

It's why Christ says in v12, '*I am* the Light of the World' – I'm that light you need to follow – and nothing and no-one else. And it's only in following me that you can come out of the darkness of sin and doubt and fear, and enjoy the light of life.

**Christ the Light of the World**

And so as Jesus says 'I am the Light of the World', standing under those great beacons, he is saying something incredible. He is saying that the pillar of fire that lead the Israelites in the desert was itself just a picture, and that these 4 giant beacons are just pictures of a picture – but that the true Light, the Light of the World, is Christ himself. That he's the one who can lead you and me and everyone else out of slavery to sin, and from under the oppression of sin and up and out into true freedom. That it's he who can lead you and guide through life until you reach the ultimate Promised Land. That it's he who can guide you through the valley of the shadow of death. That it's in him, and through him, that you can enjoy the nearness of God's presence. And that he is the light in which you can live with joy and dancing into the night. Not a joy that leaves you hung-over the next morning, but an everlasting joy that never fades. That unlike all these other false lights leading you onto the rocks, he is the only one who can truly fulfil your deepest longings.

It's why John opens his gospel by saying of Jesus, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:4-5).

And Jesus says that he is that Light for the whole world. You see, this Feast of Booths was a celebration for the people of Israel, not for the wider world. And it recalled how the pillar of fire had led the people of Israel – and no one else - out of slavery. And those four great beacons shone out over just one small city – a

city inhabited not by lots of different people groups, but by the people of Israel. But Christ comes and says again, v12, 'I am the light of *the world*' – the whole world – not just Israel – but every people group on the face of the earth can know deliverance and salvation and freedom and joy in the light of his presence.

You see, when Jesus' parents took him, whilst he was still a baby, to dedicate him in the Temple, Simeon, an old believer, took him up in his arms and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared *in the presence of all peoples*, a light for revelation *to the Gentiles*, *and* for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32). And so Simeon saw in Jesus the fulfilment of what Isaiah the prophet said would happen through the ultimate Servant of the Lord. As the Lord says in Isaiah 42:6-7: "I am the Lord; I have called you [my servant] in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, *a light for the nations*, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." And then in Isaiah 49:6, "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

And so just think how all encompassing that word 'world' that Jesus uses is. It is not that he has come to light up one small city, or be a light to one tiny people group - but that every one, in every city and megacity, in every town and every village, wherever they live, might enjoy his light.

And here, of course, is where this gets personal, because by definition that includes you. So it doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter how dark the circumstances of your life seem; it doesn't matter in what dark hole you find yourself. Christ is your light.

It doesn't matter what your job is, or isn't. It doesn't matter what your level of intellect is. It doesn't matter what religious background you are from. It doesn't matter whether you look back on your past with joy or with shame. It doesn't matter how many false lights you have been following or what rocks they have led you on to. Christ is your light.

And the reason he can be your light of salvation and your light of deliverance is that at the cross he was plunged into darkness. And at the cross he took upon himself all the darkness of our sin, all the darkness of our failure, all the darkness of our fears and unbelief, all the darkness of our wrong turns. And he was plunged into darkness, as at the cross the light of the sun was blotted out; so that the light of God's smile might fall upon you. And he sorrowed so that you might enjoy eternal joy.

And on that first Easter Sunday morning, just at sun's dawning, this same Jesus rose from the dead, so that the sunrise of God's mercy and grace, and deliverance and direction, might break upon you.

And when you know that that is what he has done for you, the Light of the World plunged into darkness that you might have the light of life, then you'll trust him

when things get dark, that his ways are good and right– even when the way is hard and a valley of shadows lies ahead. And you'll know deep security when the dark days come, and so even in those days light will dawn. And you won't need to give in to despair – because you'll know a hope in the light of his resurrection presence with you that no darkness can put out. And you won't stumble along being spiritually blind, but you'll know that though once you were blind, now you see.

And so he invites everyone – everyone who knows they need light, and deliverance from sin, and protection and guidance in life, to turn to him and come to him and believe in him, and follow him.

So as we finish, let me ask you, is Christ your light? Is he the light of *your* world? You see, in John 3:19 Jesus says, 'This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.' So, is he your light when life is dark? Or are you prone to follow false lights to false harbours? Do you know the light of his salvation, or are you lost in spiritual darkness? Do you follow him, putting your trust in what he has done for you at the cross, so that your heart is filled with the light of life, or do you light your own fires, happy to have a bit of religion, and admire Jesus at a distance, but not follow him, instead following your own ways?

You see just as Israel had to follow the pillar of fire if they were to come safely through, so you and I must follow Christ. He must be your light, your leader. Without him you are lost in the wilderness of life. But with him, you can know forgiveness, security and hope, - the light of life - the joy of knowing the light of his countenance shining upon you.