

MATT 5.14-16: LIGHT TO THE WORLD

[Chelmsford 4 September 2011]

The other day I ‘Googled’ the phrase ‘Christian light bulb jokes’, and came up with the following:

- How many charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? 21 - one to change it, and 20 to share in the experience
- How many Anglo-Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. They always use candles instead
- How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? The whole congregation needs to vote on it!

On this the first Sunday of a new church year, let me remind you that as Christians we are not into changing light-bulbs or whatever might be the ecclesiastical equivalent of playing at church – we are in the business of changing the world.

And the key to changing the world is bringing light into the world.

Listen to the words of Jesus found in Matt 5.14-16: **“You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lamp-stand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven”**.

So reads the GNB

Better still, listen to Eugene Peterson’s The Message – although it is a paraphrase, it hits the spot: *“Let me tell you why you are here.... You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light-stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hill-top, on a light-stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, the generous Father in heaven”*

On the basis of these words of Jesus, I want to make four simple statements:

1. JESUS AS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD BRINGS HOPE

Look at the way in which Mathew introduces the ministry of Jesus.

In Matt 4.12-17 he tells of how Jesus began his ministry by leaving Nazareth and going to live in Capernaum, a town by Lake Galilee. Matthew then quotes the prophet Isaiah (9.1-2): **“The people who live in darkness will see a great light. On those who live in the dark land of death, the light will shine”** (4,15) and then adds: **“From that time Jesus began to preach his message: ‘Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near’**”.

For Matthew, Jesus is the bringer of light into the world. The clear presupposition is that without Jesus there is darkness – there is gloom – there is no hope.

This was certainly true of 1st century Galilee – for centuries the country had been occupied by one foreign power after another – freedom was but a dream. Then Jesus came, preaching about the Kingdom of God. And all of a sudden people discovered hope.

We live in a very different world today – and yet for all the differences it is still a dark world – we have had riots on our streets, the threat of terrorism is constantly with us, fruitless fighting continues in the Middle East, and famine and death continue to rear their ugly heads in one part of the world after another.

Into such a dark world Jesus brings good news – the good news of the Kingdom – of the difference that God can make not just to individual lives, but to communities, to nations. Jesus is the light of the world - he brings hope – he brings direction – he guides us back home to God himself.

2. WE ARE TO BE LIGHT IN THIS DARK WORLD

“You are like light for the whole world”, says Jesus.

Strictly speaking this is a statement – but it is also an imperative.

We, the followers of Jesus, are to reflect the light of Jesus in our dark world.

Or to put it another way, we are not to be the light itself, but we are to be like the window through which the light is to be seen.

Our task is to show the difference Jesus can make, and in so doing bring hope to a world in a world of darkness.

It’s great to see you all here at church this morning, but do notice that you have not fulfilled your Christian duty by coming to church on a Sunday.

Rather first and foremost we are to let our light shine on Mondays, Tuesdays and right through the week.

Notice too that there is no place for secret discipleship.

“No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house.”

Most of the people to whom Jesus was speaking lived in dark one-room houses. Within the main room a small clay oil lamp would be burning – it would be placed on a fixed lampstand.

The last place where it would be put would be under a bowl, the bowl in question being a grain measure holding about nine litres of grain.

In the same way, your light must shine before people.

We must let our light shine.

At this point Jesus may well have been contrasting his disciples with the Qumran community, a Jewish renewal movement based on the shores of the Dead Sea. These devout Jews used to call

themselves ‘*the sons of light*’ – they loved God and did their very best to please God by the way they lived, but in fact they failed to live up to their calling. Why? Because they withdrew from the world and lived in the desert: they kept themselves to themselves and failed to let their light shine.

We by contrast are to be “**like light in this dark world**”.

In the words of one commentator (RT France): “*The ‘job description’ of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness*” – no, we are to let our light shine.

3. WE ARE TO SHINE TOGETHER

When Jesus said “**you are like light for the world**”, he was not speaking to his disciples as individuals, but rather to the group as a whole.

He uses the second person plural, not the second person singular.

Indeed, in the underlying Greek, Jesus uses the second person plural pronoun (*humeis*).

Literally, ‘*you in your life together*’. Jesus is speaking corporately, not individually.

By ourselves, the light we shine can be somewhat pathetic – but together, what a difference it can make. We are called to shine together.

This was what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the church at Philippi, “**You must shine like stars lighting up the sky**” (Phil 2.14).

This was what Jesus had in mind, when he speaks of “**a city built on a hill**”.

He has in mind not one light, but many.

In preparing for this sermon I came across some words of Marcelino, a peasant living in the Nicaraguan town of San Miguelito: “*A lit-up city that’s on top of a hill can be seen from far away, as we can see the lights of San Miguelito from very far away when we’re rowing at night on the lake. A city is a great union of people, and as there are a lot of houses together we see a lot of light. And that’s the way our community will be.*”.

Together we can make a difference -

4. WE SHINE BY THE WAY WE LIVE LIFE TOGETHER.

“**Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven**” . Yes, there is a place for words – but words alone are not enough when it comes to pointing to the difference that Jesus makes.

As one commentator puts it: “It is only as the church genuinely proclaims Christ as Lord, that is, not by mouthing theological platitudes but by manifesting his life in its life, that the church can truly be the light of the world” (Douglas Hare)

Let me finish the quote from Marcelino, the Nicaraguan peasant: “A city is a great union of people, and as there are a lot of houses together we see a lot of light. And that’s the way our community will be. It will be seen lighted from far away, if it is united by love”.

Or to return to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he says that God’s people shine like stars when they “**don’t complain or ague**” with one another.

Or to quote Peterson’s paraphrase: “Now that I’ve put you there on a hill-top, on a light-stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives”.

We reflect the light of Jesus, says Peterson, when we exercise hospitality – i.e. by what we do.

I love our present church strap-line: Central Baptist Church - ‘a place to belong’. People in Chelmsford are searching for love, are yearning for friendship, are longing for community. And the good news is that Jesus can create communities which are characterised by love and friendship – but we have to play our part. We must let our light shine. Only so can we bring hope to others.

Jesus said: “**You** [the members and friends of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford] **are like light for the whole world.** [This is your task – this is what you are here for] **A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lamp-stand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven**”. God grant that this may be true of our church as we go through this new church year.