

## Knox Church Sermon, March 2009

Some of you will be familiar with William Holman Hunt's famous depiction of Jesus as 'the Light of the World'. If you're not, or you want to be reminded of it, you'll find it on your hymn-sheet.

Holman Hunt's Jesus is a very romanticised, decidedly Anglo Saxon figure, standing with his lamp and knocking on a door that, to judge from the overgrowth around it, has not been opened for many a long year. It is one of the best-known and influential portrayals of Christ, and was even at one time a popular choice with publishers of the Bible as a frontispiece.

It has, of course, not been without its critics – and not just on account of its aesthetic qualities.

I remember a discussion once in the church I grew up where the consensus view was that, whatever the painting's artistic merits, the absence of a handle on the *outside* of the door rendered it theologically flawed. Holding to the Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination as we understood it, we were clear in my church that it was not up to the *sinner* to open up to Christ from the *inside*, but Christ's prerogative to open the door from *his* side and lead the sinner into the light. 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' we recalled Jesus saying in John 15.

In fact, of course, there is no handle shown in the painting, and we can only *infer* that it is on the inside. But however much we might want to debate who actually gets to open the door, the moral Holman Hunt invites us to draw from his work is that, even for the individual who has kept Jesus out for a very long time, he is there wanting to share his light with that person. The inspiration is clearly Revelation 3.20, the challenge to the 'lukewarm' church in Laodicea: 'Behold! I stand at your door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will eat together.'

Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised to find Jesus' statement 'I am the light of the world' interpreted in the *individualistic* way this painting does. After all, there are numerous instances in the Gospels where Jesus challenges

individuals, who have hidden themselves away from the light, to open themselves up to it –

- those too full of their own religious self-importance
- those too attached to their earthly possessions
- those too ready to exploit others for their own gain
- those too ready to judge others.

Perhaps most obvious are the stories where Jesus literally releases people from darkness by giving them sight – the man blind from his birth in John 1, the two blind men in Matthew 9, the beggar Bartimaeus in Mark 10. In both a literal and metaphorical sense did Jesus make true the claim recorded in John 12.46: 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness.'

To the New Testament writers, 'light' and 'darkness' represented both 'good' and 'evil' and 'life' and 'death', and for them Jesus came to show the power of the former over the latter. Matthew interprets a passage he quotes from the prophet Isaiah in this way:

'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned' (Matt 4.16);

and Luke is even more explicit when he records Simeon describing the infant Jesus as God's instrument of salvation and 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2.30,32).

John uses Jesus' claim 'I am the light of the world' precisely to demonstrate who he is. The whole purpose of his Gospel, as John tells us himself, is that his readers

'may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.31),

but in the specific passage in which this 'I Am' saying is set, Jesus is responding to the Temple police and others who doubted that a prophet could come out of Galilee.

That whole narrative in John 8 is fascinating because, as so often happens when people are forced to confront an uncomfortable truth, Jesus' detractors raise points of order to try to turn the discussion from the *substance* of what is being discussed to the *rules* for discussing it!

But the implication is clear: those who follow Jesus 'will have the light of life', those who reject him have chosen death rather than life – as of course proved to be the case with those who opposed him and brought him to trial.

That Jesus offers to give us the 'light of life' is good news indeed. It is what lies at the very heart of the Gospel, the opportunity, as individual women and men, to be free from a twilight existence and break down the door that keeps us estranged from God and turned in completely on ourselves. As 'the light of the world' Jesus brings us release from all the limitations imposed by 'darkness' – including

- an inability to discern where we are,
- to find a clear direction or path ahead,
- to see ourselves as others see us,
- to see the needs of others,
- to enjoy the 'life in all its fullness' Jesus came to announce.

But if Jesus is the light of *the world*, then he does more than just rescue us *as individuals* from darkness, sin and death.

In the dramatic opening to his Gospel, John speaks of Jesus in a cosmic sense  
 the Word who was with God in the beginning  
 the one through whom all things came into being  
 the bringer of life and light to all people  
 the light that shines in the darkness which the darkness could not overcome.

As we have noted Luke claiming, he is a light to lighten the Gentiles. His light has bearing on whole communities, whole kingdoms, whole nations. He shines a light in *all* dark places, exposing and dealing with wickedness and

deceit and death-dealing, not just in our private and personal lives, but in the wider world.

And this dimension of his mission is also clear in the Gospels. Not only did Jesus lead men and women individually from darkness into light, he exposed corruption and exploitation where he saw it in the structures of the society in which he lived and moved. It is telling how he reserved his sharpest invective, not for those singled out by the authorities as exemplars of a sinful life – like the woman caught committing adultery in the verses which precede our text – but for those authorities themselves, who used their position and power to oppress and exploit others.

The litany of 'woes' he delivers in Matthew 23, for example, is a scathing attack on a nexus of power designed to make life intolerable for ordinary folk, and his removal of the money changers in the Temple a root and branch attack on economic structures designed explicitly to make the poor poorer and the rich richer.

Jesus' ministry, in other words, had an impact on *society* as well as on the individuals *within* that society. The central theme of his preaching – the 'kingdom of God' – clearly did not cash out solely in a post-mortem existence but posited a profound challenge to the *status quo*.

The genius of his message, in other words, was that it not only transformed individuals in their behaviour and orientation but challenged the way they related to one another – their cultural assumptions about power, status, wealth and identity. As the American activist and writer Jim Wallis is fond of saying, the gospel is always personal but never private.

For Luke this 'public' dimension is so central to Jesus' ministry that he places right at the start of his Gospel, in the manner of a manifesto, Jesus' undertaking to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and the year of God's 'Jubilee'. It is little wonder that Jesus was perceived by the powers that be, not as a religious

trouble-maker to be put to death by stoning, but as a political threat to be nailed to a cross.

There's a challenge here for all of us in this I believe, for in Matthew 5.14 Jesus also calls *us* to be 'lights of the world'. 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid... let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

How far are we, as followers of Christ, committed not only to sharing the 'good news' with our neighbours, but to bringing the gospel of Christ to bear on our community, our city, our nation, our world? How relevant do we see the Gospel message of hope, of reconciliation, of peace, of justice, to the issues of our day – to issues like housing, health care, taxation, foreign aid, climate change, income distribution... the current economic downturn?

Do we see the wider implications of the biblical call to be 'light' and 'salt' in the world, to be good stewards of the earth, to side with the poor and the oppressed, to be peacemakers and reconcilers, to 'love our neighbour' and want for all that 'life in all its fullness'? When we pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' do we do that within the context of a commitment actually to help make that happen?

Part of my remit in my new role at the University is to encourage us, as Christians, to develop our 'public witness' and to contribute to public debate and policy formation from a theological perspective. I believe there is much 'light' that we can bring to debates around current issues and that we can contribute much by encouraging fresh thinking, offering vision and imagination, provoking a radical re-think about the cultural assumptions in *our* day – while also developing realistic and workable alternatives.

The earliest Christian communities understood the public dimension of the message entrusted to them by their risen and ascended Lord, engaging not only in public preaching and public assembly but making explicit their rejection of an automatic 'yes' to the demands by the powers that be, their commitment to an alternative authority. Do we also believe that authentic

obedience to our Lord's command 'follow me' involves challenging and informing the values underpinning *our* society just as Jesus' teaching of the kingdom impacted on his?

Our other reading this morning, from the Book of Revelation, gives us a fascinating glimpse of the vision we pursue, a city or community in which darkness and night are banished and there is only the light of God's glory. Here and now we are called to be lights because we are confronted by cultures of death, but in the heavenly city the nations will walk by the light of God's glory, which will render even the sun and the moon redundant. There the tree of life will produce leaves 'for the healing of the nations', a picture from which we should draw profound inspiration and hope. In that city, too, the gates are not shut to keep certain types of people out, and there will be no *temple*, no place where we try, imperfectly, to anticipate being 'true community' because there we shall know it and live it fully.

Our challenge, I believe, is to draw insights from that vision, to discern ways in which we can make our own society reflect, however partially, that picture of a city where the light of justice and truth prevails over the power of darkness, evil and death. If we take seriously the call of the one who said 'I am the Light of the World' to be ourselves 'lights in the world' it's a challenge we shall want to take up.