

MATTHEW 2:13-18
BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES

These short grey winter days can be hard for people. There can be very little sunlight and these are days that are dark. The US Navy did a study about 30 years ago of their service personnel based around Thurso on the North coast and in Greenland and discovered that during the long, dark winter nights, the mental health of their service personnel was worse than in summer. Seasonal Affective Disorder is a recognisable phenomenon, affecting people who suffer poor mental health because of the lack of light in winter. In the bible, the absence of light affects the spiritual health of people too; the absence of light gives space for evil to blossom and to capture the hearts and minds of the people of God; they are lost in their sin because darkness has taken hold of their hearts. The coming of light changes things: the seasons change when the sun moves North of the equator and spring and summer bring long days and short nights; spiritual life changes when light dawns upon my soul.

Epiphany is the Sunday when we remember Jesus' appearing – that's what "epiphany" means! This is the Sunday when we tell the story of the wise men because of the appearing of the star in the sky is the appearing of a light that guides men. Isaiah 60 looks forward to the coming of light and in the coming of light, the glory of God dawns upon the world. John's gospel is not telling the stories of the wise men or any other nativity character, but it opens up for us the themes at the heart of the coming of Jesus; here's one: "*In Him...*" (*John 1:4f*) Jesus keeps this theme going when He talks about Himself as "the light of the world", the One who reveals God to us and who is light to be followed. Today we're going to unpack these themes a little more.

Let's go back to Isaiah 60. Hundreds of years before Jesus came, here was a promise of what was to come and right at the heart of these promises is the contrast between light and darkness. "*Darkness...*" (*Isaiah 60:2*) and that speaks about all kinds of things, none of which is good. Here is a people lost in its wickedness and evil; a people not knowing which way to turn to find goodness and grace; they are lost in gloom and sin. But that is not last word: "*Arise shine...*" (*Isaiah 60:1*) "*but the...*" (*Isaiah 60:2*) and when the Lord comes, the world is changed; darkness is dispelled by the light. Light speaks of the glory of God dawning upon His people, the Lord revealing Himself to the world. From being a people brought down into darkness and gloom, they are now a people who live in the light and are illumined by the glory of God Himself, a people greatly blessed by God.

There is no real surprise that the story of the nativity is full of light. The angels come reflecting God's glory: when they speak to the shepherds and reveal the good news to them, it is no surprise that the glory of the Lord shone around! It is no surprise that the wise men follow a star, a light leads people from across the world to the child born in Bethlehem. The prophecies and promises of Isaiah, hundreds of years before have come true when Jesus is born. Light has dawned! God has kept His promises and not only is there light for the world, but the glory of God has come upon the world in this little child. This is an event of magnitude, a hinge moment in the life of the world, a transforming moment in our salvation; the glory of the Lord shone around and light dawned when Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

"*In Him...*" (*John 1:4,5*) "Life" is an idea that John likes. He writes often about Jesus bringing life! It means more than breathing and eating, though Jesus is the creator of that life too. For John, the notion of "life" is tied up with our relationship with God. To know God is to know life to the full; the fullest kind of life for us is life lived knowing God, loving God, trusting God – only with these qualities in our hearts and minds are we truly and fully alive! Jesus is *the* life-bringer. Paradoxically, that bringer of life completed His mission by dying, but that is God breaking the boundaries of the way we think! "Life" and "light" are joined at the hip! They are part of the same salvation that Jesus brings. Not only is Jesus *the* life-bringer, He is also *the* light-bearer, the One who lights up our lives, who helps us to understand God and who fills our hearts and

minds with the blessing of God in all its fullness. The coming of light is about the coming of Jesus and with Him the coming of forgiveness, peace, hope, grace, joy. These are all good; they are all glorious; they are all wonderful for us to know and to believe.

Light still shines in our world. Jesus is still the light of the world. He is still the One who shows us what God is like. "God is Jesus-like" we said on Christmas Eve. People are still drawn to Jesus, are still coming to Him to find out what life is all about. We tell the stories of Jesus, we tell people what Jesus has done and light dawns in their souls when the Spirit takes our weak and faltering words and brings people to Jesus, face-to-face with the Light of the world and our hearts and minds are filled with all kinds of good things, are filled with the blessing of God. "I looked to Jesus, and I found, in Him my star, my sun; and in that light of life I'll walk, till travelling days are done." (Hy 540; Horatious Bonar) Is this a light-bulb moment? It may take time, but light dawns on our soul and we are blessed by God in all kinds of ways.

But darkness doesn't give up without a fight! Crafty old Herod thought he had played a good trick. To the wise men he said: "Go and..." (*Matthew 2:8*) They believed him at first; they were ready to go back to Jerusalem to report the whereabouts of the king, but God steps in again. "Having been..." (*Matthew 2:12*) Herod is darkness trying to overcome the light. This is the spiritual battle for the soul of Israel, the battle between the spiritual forces of light and darkness, there through the whole Bible story and the darkness can't live with the light; indeed the darkness will try anything to overcome the light. Herod is furious when the wise men don't come back; he didn't ever want to worship the new king; he'd always planned to find him and kill him. Anger wants to be vented against Jesus, but Jesus has escaped, the family has gone to Egypt before Herod got there. The darkness in his soul vents its anger against all the boys under 2 in Bethlehem to try to get the One he's really looking for! How deep is the darkness that will stoop so low, but the light has escaped and has not been overcome.

But darkness still doesn't give up without a fight! Darkness is always trying to put out the light! Darkness is always trying to overcome the light. Darkness comes in all kinds of shapes and forms. All through the history of the Church and the gospel there have been and still are times when darkness seems to gain the upper hand. The Roman persecution of the Church; we used to talk about the Dark Ages! The crusades when the church spent years trying to keep Christendom alive in the Holy land by force of great armies; the Inquisition time when the church spent a great deal of time and energy weeding out heresy by pain and torture; in seventeenth century Scotland, there were two brands of Christianity fighting for top spot, killing times they were called; the grace of God in the gospel was seemingly hidden in these times behind violence and pain. Every victim of child abuse in the church has been visited by darkness in their soul by people who should have been bringing them grace and so darkness gains a foothold in the church again. Every time someone gossips, every time someone hates, every time someone bullies, every time someone vents a prejudice in the life of the church, darkness gains a foothold again in the life of the church. Darkness comes in war, pain and suffering; we have seen that last year in the centenary of 1918. The Atheists have been delighting in recent years that the fortunes of the Church in UK have been on the way down. "Christianity is on the way out" they have said; for them, religion is exposed for what it is, a "fairy tale to help those who can't stand the dark!" There are our own personal dark places that we visit, the times when we suffer the pains and anguish of life.

Darkness does not ever overcome the light. It only takes a single candle to break the deepest darkness. For all these dark times in the history of the world and the church, the light has not been extinguished. Still the grace of God is to be found; still there is a people of God to live by faith in Jesus. The world still goes on and there are still people with a good heart and a heart of faith. There was an opinion poll in *The Times* last week, which showed that the number of people who go to Church, and who have tried to pray, has gone up from last year; it might only be a straw in the wind, but we'll take that; the darkness of atheism has not overcome the light; the light still shines brightly in our world and will not be overcome. It amazes me, given the

kind of things that the Church has done, and given the kind of world we live in, that the Church still exists, but light will not be overcome; Jesus will still shine and people will still find in Him the light of their lives. Here is something to grasp; God is faithful; the light will prevail.

Walk in the light! I was driving at night and had my headlights on but I could hardly see, so when I stopped for petrol, I thought I'd better check that the lights were working properly! They were working but were so dirty that it was no wonder the light could not get out; once I'd cleaned them their light was so much brighter! We are the light of the world, but we think, say, and do things which are wrong; the light gets dimmed and can hardly be seen. We need to walk in the light. Light goes into the deepest parts of our souls, and shows up our faults and mistakes and we repent; light then shows us the way to live, the good ways to embrace, the dark ways to avoid; walk in the light! Let it be our aim for 2019 to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be, to live in the way He shows us and the way He teaches us. Let us be determined to walk away from everything that Jesus does not like! Walk in the light, shine the light, reflect the light! *"Arise shine..." (Isaiah 60:1)*