

“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD”: WHEN LIFE REQUIRES YOU TO SEE YOURSELF IN A NEW LIGHT

There’s a good chance that your happiest memories involve time in the sunshine.

We treasure days on the beach, long evenings spent with people we love, and the views we drank in as the sun set.

So often, we seem to do best *in the light*.

On the other hand, as things get darker, so do our behaviour and moods. One of the hardest times at uni is as autumn turns to winter, and the evenings draw in. Summer sunshine is a distant memory and it’s still *ages* until Christmas.

Research shows that mood disorders (like depression) and harmful behaviours (like violent crime) spike as it starts getting dark. In the dark, our worst parts show themselves.

We need light.

Light illuminates the way before us. Light brings safety. Light brings health. Light brings *life*.

This term, we’re exploring Jesus’ ‘I am’ claims. And one of the most remarkable is Jesus’ claim to be ‘the light of the world.’

Jesus makes his claim at a dramatic moment: at the height of celebrations for the Feast of Tabernacles, an important Jewish holiday.

This holiday remembered a famous episode in Jewish history. The Israelites were enslaved by a ruthless Egyptian pharaoh. God miraculously freed his people, but they were then required to travel *through the wilderness* to their new home in the Promised Land. God gave them no map for this journey, but he promised to *lead them* all the way.

Part of his provision came at night-time. God sent fire to direct the people and light the way. When the fire moved, the people had to pack up and follow along. When the fire stopped, the people stopped too.

When they eventually arrived in the Promised Land, an annual holiday was established recalling these events. People would camp out in tents or booths, echoing how their ancestors camped in the wilderness. At the holiday's high-point, they would gather in Jerusalem. At night-time, they lit massive beacons. These blazing lights reminded them of God's fiery guidance.

In days before electricity, it must have been amazing. Normally, when the sun set, that was it—activity ceased. Yet, on this one night, there was light *everywhere*.

Jesus chooses *this moment* to make his claim:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

In the original story, the Israelites showed that they were following God by following the light. To follow the light was to follow God. To follow God was to follow the light.

Now Jesus says: following the light means following *me*.

Jesus' claim is that God wants us to follow *him* with the same focus with which the Israelites followed the fire in the wilderness.

And, he says, if we follow him in this way, we will know him as the light of life. We needn't be in the dark anymore.

Jesus is saying that, without him, the world is a dark place.

Even a glimpse at the world confirms that it can be very dark indeed.

In a dark world, we're not safe. In a dark world, things can feel hopeless. In a dark world, we don't know where we're going—we have no ultimate direction. We don't know why we're here; with only each other's best guesses to draw upon, we don't know where we're heading either.

We may set ourselves goals but when it comes to real direction, we're in the dark.

And, if we're honest, feeling unseen in the dark, we allow ourselves to do some awful things.

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus states:

Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

Jesus is describing each of us. Though we were made *by God for God*, each of us has gone our own way. We're so in the dark that, when Jesus steps in, claiming to be light, we feel threatened. We'd rather stay in the dark, without him.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day illustrate this. Look at how they respond to him:

The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."

Rather than considering Jesus' claims, the Pharisees simply reject him. Rather than hearing him out, they label him a liar. They've made their minds up already.

They're in the dark.

We can respond similarly to Jesus. His own words and life—so full of love and kindness—expose how grubby we are. We become aware of the massive gap between us and him. We can no longer live under illusions as Jesus exposes the selfishness, pride, envy and lust in our hearts.

So unpleasant is seeing ourselves in this way, it's tempting to silence Jesus. In Jesus' own day, this led to his crucifixion.

Followers of Jesus too can feel tempted to turn to lesser light sources, even if they grossly distort reality and keep certain things hidden.

We would rather live in the dark.

Yet if we don't want Jesus' light, we can't live without it either.

Without Jesus we remain in darkness, no more able to find life than if we were lost in the desert night. We're destined to stumble around aimlessly, staring death in the eye—now and eternally.

Into this, Jesus claims to be the light of the world.

Which means: whichever country we're from, and however gripped by darkness we feel, he can be light to us. And he remains full of love and kindness. He only illuminates what he comes to deal with. The light that exposes is the same light that brings truth and guidance.

And, if we walk in the light, we will also follow Jesus to where he wants to take us.

Where is that?

Not just the Promised Land, but through death into the eternal sunshine of his world-made-new—a place of forgiveness, safety, health and warmth... in which all darkness is gone forever.