

Seeing the Light and Following Christ

There are two ideas I want to concentrate on this morning, both of which contribute to one, overall, big idea. Psalm 112 tells us that “A light shines in the darkness for the upright, the righteousness are merciful and full of compassion” this is the first idea. Matthew tells us – and I’ll paraphrase this: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world – but what use is salt when it isn’t salty, and what use is light when you hide it.” This is the second idea. Both contribute to one big idea, or concept, which is: We, as Christians, are the light in the darkness for others – so we mustn’t hide that from others, or turn away – i.e., be less than Christian – if others reach out to us.

But what makes us so special, if indeed we can claim to be special? Jesus tells his disciples that they need to be more righteous than the scribes or the Pharisees. What made them so special? But before we answer that question, let’s rewind for a moment and think about the idea of light. Particularly the light that shines in the darkness. Matthew talks about the lamp at night – today we’d talk about a light bulb – ping into life, or if you have those energy saving ones gradually working themselves up to the right light levels. But as we’re talking about ideas, we can all, I’m sure, agree that light bulbs also represent ‘bright ideas’. What we also call “Light bulb moments”

Light bulb moments are very common in the Bible. Possibly the most famous “seeing the light” story is that of Saul – the persecutor of Christians – who is blinded for his sins against them. Later he repents and is granted the grace to see again. He sees the light both literally and spiritually. He changes his name, as we all know, to Paul. Paul with a new name, a new faith, and a new start becomes one of the central figures in the early Christian church. If this was one of those make-over shows on the telly it would be called something like “religion, religion, religion” instead of “location, location, location.”

Saul, later Paul, is that typically unlikely person. The sort of unlikely person who you would least expect to be a champion of the Christian faith. And yet there he is moving from being one of the faith's greatest persecutors and critics to being its greatest advocate.

Other examples include the diminutive tax collector Zacchaeus. He’s the one who shins up a tree to get a better view of Jesus. He is laughed at, and the laughter draws Jesus over to learn more about the reason why this small man in a tree is the object of hate and derision. Ultimately the story ends with Jesus going to Zacchaeus’ house for a bit of tea – much to the consternation of the crowd, because Zacchaeus isn’t a nice man. However, the implication of this story is that Zacchaeus ultimately accepts Jesus and embraces Jesus’ message. Encouraged by Jesus he has a change of heart.

Another example is Jonah - we talked about him a few weeks ago - Jonah, who despite what we shall now call “Giant Fish Issues” refuses to do what God commands – my goodness he’s a stubborn man! But he comes around too eventually. Although I’m not sure he could look at another plate of mackerel ever again.

For Paul, Zacchaeus, Jonah, and others the call to worship God was not an easy path that suggested itself. It didn’t start off being something in them. There was a moment of realization in their lives that they had been called to serve God, and that it was an offer they found that they couldn’t refuse. It was their light-bulb moment.

What does this demonstrate?

I think that this demonstrates that even the most least likely person is capable of recognizing that there is a purpose in life greater than their own wants and needs. It also shows that God doesn’t discriminate between those who love him, and those who don’t. Jesus tells his disciples that they need to be more righteous than the scribes or the Pharisees. What made them so special also?

And so, we come to our passage from Matthew. Jesus has wandered up a mountain and the disciples have followed him. Jesus begins to teach them. If this is darkness, then Jesus is striking the match. His first job is to gather together the disciples and instruct them on what this new way of looking at faith will be like. Here they are abandoning all the old teachings and following something new, something different.

These 12 disciples were drawn from all kinds of backgrounds, but they weren’t chosen for who they were, or how popular they were, or even how pious they were, but were chosen for what they could do for God. Like Paul,

Zacchaeus and Jonah, the disciples are an unlikely group of individuals to be serving God and collectively they make up a motley crew. Peter is quick tempered and almost as quick to jump to the wrong conclusions. Thomas a habitual doubter, Judas is scheming and ambitious. Andrew isn't the greatest leader, James, and John place personal interest above anything else, others are radical. Collectively the actions of twelve display a less than Christian attitude to Jesus' mission, they are obstructive to the people they meet, they argue with him about the things that he does, they can't be relied on to stay awake in the hour of his greatest need.

But then – aren't we also like this – who are we to say that we're any better? We know that there are times when we behave in a way that isn't Christian. You can probably think of examples in your own lives even as recently as this week when we've done or said the wrong thing. But that's humanity; we are prone to the flaws in our characters.

I think that Jesus fully knew this fact. In spite of the flaws, he loves us and forgives us. He loved and forgave the disciples too. Jesus takes them on not because they are especially pious but because they can potentially contribute as advocates for God's love and through their very flawed ordinariness can convince others to join them. These twelve, flawed as they are, will become the foundations for the early church. They went out into the world to share the message of Jesus; they brought that light to others. What Jesus does in the passage from Matthew is draw these individuals together, he gives them a common purpose, he encourages them to do good works, and to follow God, to love God – and not to be ashamed of it.

God wants that for us too. God wants us to love one another and do good works but – like the disciples – we're ordinary people too. Now I don't think that we're especially pious either – although some of us might like to think we're more pious than others – and yet here we are in this church. Here we are from all kinds of different backgrounds and places.

I asked at the beginning what makes us so special? I think we're special not because we're exceptional or superior people - or even because we're "good Christians", but because we're together in this church because God has drawn us all together as a representation of his love. He thinks that we - different as we are - will serve and act as his examples.

Take a moment to take a look around you. We're a funny old mixture of people – some of us funnier than others – yet we accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We tolerate each other's foibles and idiosyncrasies – sometimes we find it easy to rub along, sometimes we find it difficult.

But we still love God; we're still willing to do God's work. We're willing to accept that we do the wrong thing, and willing to accept God's forgiveness. We're willing to share God's grace with those who want to receive it. I think we're special not because we are the best Christians in the best church ever but because as individuals, we know what it is to receive God's love.

I think we're special to God because we're ordinary; our lives can be easy and happy and sometimes they can be difficult and complicated. We know what it is to live in the real world. So did the disciples, so did Jesus – he lived a fairly ordinary life for his first thirty years.

But our light-bulb moment, if you like, is that real life can be understood and experienced through the filter of Christian faith. Because we're just like everybody else – like everyone who isn't in this church today – we understand their lives and problems. We can show them that we're just like them, and that God is on our side not because we are super pious scripture quoting bright eyed evangelical types, but because we're the bleary-eyed stressed run of the mill types like them – and that is something special – we communicate on the same level playing field as everyone else, we understand their lives.

We then, have a duty to be the light in the lives of others who may be far from God and to share that light with others – and not hide it - because God's greatest advocates are those, like us, who struggle with life, struggle with faith, but believe that we will get there in the end.

I'll end with something you'll hear from people when you tell them you're a Christian. "Oh Christians!" you'll hear them say "They don't live in the real world; they don't have a clue what life is like for normal people like us!" Well, we do know what life is like. We know in spades. And as for the person who says that? Don't give up on them because they may just turn out to be one of God's greatest advocates. They just don't know it yet. Amen.