9 February 2020: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday before Lent

Isaiah 58:1–9a; 1 Corinthians 2:1–12; Matthew 5:13–20

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You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden (Mt. 5.14)

This morning’s Gospel is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which is an extended discourse composed of Jesus’s teaching, setting out what it means to live our lives in the way that he wants us to do, in other words, what it means to be distinctively Christian.

It is found in St Matthew’s Gospel, which presents the author’s memories of what Jesus said and did. St John’s Gospel remembers things very differently: he depicts Jesus saying “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8.12) Is there a contradiction here, between Matthew’s “You are the light of the world” and John’s “I am the light of the world”, or are we just looking at two sides of the same coin?

Let’s start with St John, and see whether we can resolve the apparent contradiction. I wonder if the verse from his Gospel which I have just quoted rang any bells for you; it ran, “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Perhaps the second half of that reminds you of the verse from Isaiah which we hear in the Advent and Christmas carol services, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (Is 9.2.) Isaiah, of course lived centuries before Christ, but his longing for the light of God to dispel the darkness of this world was fulfilled in the coming of Christ. The verse from St John which I’ve just quoted may also have reminded you of the opening verses of his Gospel, which are also very much part of the Christmas story: “In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”

The learned Anglo-Saxon monk, the Venerable Bede, also wrote vividly of the Light of Christ dispelling the darkness of this world in a prayer which he composed in Latin, and
which is emblazoned in very bold modern lettering on his tomb in Durham Cathedral. The English version is as follows:

O Christ, thou art the Morning Star,  
who as the night of this world passes away,  
givest to thy saints the promise of the light of life,  
and spreadest out the everlasting dawn;  
bring us, we beseech thee, to the brightness of thy rising,  
where thou livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit,  
one God in all eternity. Amen

The morning star is the precursor of the dawn, and so at least part of what he meant by “the brightness of thy rising” is the dawn of God’s Kingdom in the resurrection at the end of time, but I think we can safely say that when he writes of the promise to his people of the light of life he is referring to something that is life-changing in the here and now.

Here in Oxford there is a famous painting which explores very powerfully the present and future aspects of the light of the world theme, and that is Holman Hunt’s famous painting known as The Light of the World; many of you will know it from reproductions, but if you haven’t seen the real thing, do go to Keble Chapel and look at it; admission is free of charge, and the Chapel is open to the public for the hours that the College is; you will see The Light of the World as a small altarpiece in a side-chapel below the organ. This painting doesn’t, in fact, illustrate either of the light of the world verses which we have been thinking about so far, but a completely different verse from the Book of Revelation (3.20), “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if anyone hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to them, and will sup with them, and they with me.” It gets its title from the fact that the figure of Jesus, standing at the door waiting for it to be opened to him, is carrying a lantern which casts a bold, warm golden light, right across the centre of the picture. If the householder will let Jesus in, the light of the world will be brought into his or her life. That’s the here and now aspect of the painting; but there is a darker side too: the door is overgrown, with weeds growing up it and all over the ground in front of it, so it doesn’t seem much used; and Jesus can’t let himself in, because the door has no handle on the outside: the person inside is free to admit him or ignore him. So the Holman Hunt interpretation presents the viewer with a very clear and decisive choice in the here and now – open the door or fail to respond. But our future hope is there in the
painting too: the morning star is in the sky, and the sky itself behind the figure of Jesus is beginning to lighten with the coming dawn. God’s kingdom is coming!

There is plenty in that painting to prompt each of us to think about our lives, and our relationship to Jesus. But in a completely different way we in Oxford are surrounded by more reminders of the light of God than the citizens of just about any other city in the world. These reminders are carved in stone, engraved on metal, and printed in books and on tee-shirts, and even on carrier bags; I’m talking, of course, about the University’s heraldic device, Dominus illuminatio mea, The Lord is my light, the opening words of Psalm 27; and the continuation beyond those first three words would have instinctively come to mind for earlier generations, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear: the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?” It is significant that those words on the coat of arms do not surround a lantern or a lighthouse, but they are written on the pages of a book, reminding us that it is through the Bible, or writings expounding the Bible, that we can encounter God’s light. The University can no longer respond corporately to that challenge, except by maintaining the funding of the Faculty of Theology and University Sermons: it is for each one of us individually to open our hearts to receive the Light of the World, and indeed to become the Light of the World, which is how St Matthew recorded Jesus’s teaching about it.

Remember how this morning’s reading went on, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.” That is both a promise and a warning: it is a reminder of the opportunity that we have of commending our faith to others, if we as individual Christians or as a church, do and say Christ-like things; but it is also a warning of how our sins and errors can bring discredit on Christ. That verse was made famous by the seventeenth century Puritan, John Winthrop, one of the leaders of the first group of Massachusetts Bay colonists who set out from Southampton to Boston, to make a new life in the New World; he spelled it out like this, “As a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us”, meaning, if the Puritans failed to uphold their godly way of life, then their sins and errors would be exposed for all the world to see, which would contradict all the claim they had made for the holy way of life of their community. That is just as true for us in the modern world. If any of us, clergy or lay, is revealed publicly as misusing our involvement with people or valuables in a way that is illegal or immoral, we bring the church into discredit; and when the church as an institution says or does crass things, whether it is about investment policy or about personal relationships, the Body of Christ is pilloried afresh.
Our Gospel reading also challenged us about the quality of our lives as Christians by using completely different imagery, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (Matt 5.13) That verse always reminds me of one of those slightly muddled explanations offered by a young child; in this case when asked about why salt is used in cooking, he or she replied, “Salt is what makes your potatoes nasty when you don’t put any on”! That is a bit topsy-turvy, but it seems to me more vivid and effective than any paragraph of food technology notes about salt; and in our context it encapsulates memorably why our society and the wider world are damaged if there is no distinctive Christian presence and witness in word and deed. So please remember that child’s words about salt! You and I must be that salt.

I’ll finish on another piece of food imagery. Those of you of a certain age may remember a particular launch of a new brand of tinned soup – it may have been Campbell’s – and one of the adverts showed people tasting rival brands, at which they turned up their noses, dismissing them as “So-so soup”; in other words “Mehhh!” – there’s nothing actually wrong with it, but it just doesn’t do anything for you. And so my final challenge to you individually, and to all of us as members of this Cathedral community, is “Are you going to settle for being so-so Christians? Or are you going to live and speak, publicly and privately, in a way that makes a difference to the society in which we live, and to the wider world?”

May the Light of the World shine in our hearts and in our lives. Amen