

The Light of the World

Exodus 3:1-15, John 8:12-59 (ESV)

April 1, 2007

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Is this of interest to you? It is to me. There is a lot of darkness in the world: hatred, contempt, war, disease, decay, decline, murder, mayhem, despotism, crime, infidelity, despair, and the worship of false gods. There is a lot of darkness in the world, and it threatens to undo us. I, for one, would welcome some help.

Over and against these massed forces of darkness stands the One who makes this affirmation: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The “I am” echoes the “I AM WHO I AM” name of God which we read from the book of Exodus. Note also the definite article: “I am the light of the world.” Jesus is not one light among many. He acknowledges no other light. He is the light of the world. How can he say this? He who is the light of the world could say this because “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3 (ESV)). In fact, “He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:2 (ESV)). Indeed, he “was God” from “the beginning” (John 1:1 (ESV)). Thus from God alone comes the power to overcome the darkness of the world.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” How is this the case? In the birth of Jesus Christ, God has entered the world as one of us. In the life of Jesus Christ, God has lived with us as one of us. In the death of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power of evil and forgiven our sin. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power of death and promised eternal life even to us. In all of these ways, the light of the world has shined in the darkness, overcoming estrangement, loneliness, alienation, sin, death, and evil.

Today Jesus not only proclaims that light but also invites even us to live in that light by believing in, and following, him. To believe in him is to acknowledge him as the light. Either you see it or you do not. Light has a self-evidencing quality about it. If you do not see it, I suspect that no amount of argument would convince you of its reality. If you do see the light, the very act of seeing it involves one level of acknowledgment of its reality. But beyond that initial level, a choice must be made whether to acknowledge it as light or not, whether to walk in and by it or not, whether to live by its illumination or to seek the darkness instead. Which will it be?

Thus, is the birth of Jesus Christ only one more birth of poverty or God's gift of himself to the world? Is the life of Jesus Christ that of an ancient Jewish rabbi or God's revelation of himself and his character to the world? Are the teachings of Jesus Christ those of a madman, those of an inspired prophet, or the very word of God spoken by the Son of God? Is the death of Jesus Christ an evil deed by evil men or the key event of self-sacrifice in God's redemption of the world? Is the resurrection of Jesus Christ wishful thinking on the part of deluded disciples or the beginning of the new creation, the firstfruits of a large harvest? A choice must be made whether to acknowledge the light as light or not, whether to walk in and by it or not, whether to live by its illumination or to seek the darkness instead. Which will it be?

In today's reading the opportunity to acknowledge the light as light was greeted with a barrage of questions to and about Jesus, some of which probably pointed to greater truth than they realized, but all of which were ultimately dismissive. "Where is your Father?" "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" "Who are you?" "How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?" "Who do you make yourself out to be?" "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

At each juncture there was an opportunity to believe, to follow, and to obey Jesus Christ. At each opportunity, the decision was made to disbelieve, to turn away, and to disobey Jesus Christ, indeed to demonize him, to destroy him, and thus to embrace the darkness. We remember this today not to criticize those who have gone before us but to make clear what the stakes are. The very reading of the word of God today provides even us an opportunity to believe, to follow, and to obey. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ today carries with it the terrible negative possibility that we will disbelieve, turn away, and disobey. The stakes could not be any higher. A choice must be made today and will be made today whether to acknowledge the light as light or not, whether to walk in and by it or not, whether to live by its illumination or to seek the darkness instead. Which will it be?

It is written in Psalm 118 (ESV)—which the people sang to Jesus on the first Palm Sunday as they acknowledged him as the light of the world, parts of which we have sung this morning, and one verse of which we recite every Sunday morning—it is written in Psalm 118:

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!...
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.

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This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

May God give us the grace today to acknowledge Jesus as his Son who comes in the name of the Lord and so to believe in him, to follow him, and to obey him. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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