

10.30am Common Worship HC, Sunday 22nd January 2017, Beverley Minster

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light!

Who are these people? What is this darkness all about? How do you mean 'seen a great light'?

If someone stopped you here, after a service, or in the street, or anywhere, how would you answer such questions?

Well, it's from the Old Testament isn't it? And Jesus is supposed to be the light or something? I'm not sure how it works but they go on about it every year at Christmas...

These words are indeed from the great celebration poem in Isaiah chapter nine which we hear always during Advent and Christmas as part of our worship and festivities, and the reason it is repeated in Matthew's gospel, as we heard this morning, is that it is the transition link between the Old and New Testaments. Some commentators see it as part of a coronation liturgy, to accompany the enthronement of a new king. The birth of that new king is announced later in the chapter with the words sung always with gusto at every annual rendition of Handel's Messiah 'unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called the Prince of Peace'. All of the anticipation that goes along with a change in leadership is packed into these words. We are still in the Christmas season by the way, so it's ok to go on about it again and I sincerely hope you are not getting fed up of hearing it.

I say this with a more serious purpose because for me the idea of seeing a great light from out of the darkness is a very key part of my Christian understanding. Three things central to this light which cannot be found in darkness are Hope, Trust and Joy. In times of darkness hope is dormant but in times of change it comes to life. In times of darkness there is no joy, only gloom. In times of darkness trust becomes difficult. There is much uncertainty and betrayal is always possible. In times of darkness, God seems to be absent. The promise of Jesus is that he is always with us, God will never abandon us and the light that is Jesus Christ will always overcome whatever darkness we face. When darkness comes around again, as it will because we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, we can look again to the light and find in him the trust and hope and joy which make our lives complete.

It's amazing how the prospect of something new, especially the birth of a child, can usher in renewed hope, confidence and trust for the things life has to offer. This passage is most likely to have been composed or at least written down in honour of the birth of King Hezekiah. The people of Israel had had a rotten time under King Ahaz and the birth of his successor was cause for great hope that things would change under a new leader. As the prophet speaks, so he articulates the desire of the people to be restored to a right relationship with God through the incoming of a new kingdom of peace, justice and righteousness. We are at a time of great change in the world where we seem to stand on the threshold of darkness and light and we do not know which way the balance will tip. The point about a renewal through and with God though, is that all those possibilities for a fresh start present themselves unconditionally and with love. This we now know to be revealed to the whole world in Jesus Christ our saviour. Now is a time calling faithful people to prayer and witness.

In the time of king Hezekiah though, this hope was specific and focussed on the king – if the king failed, then so did the hope. Ahaz, and many other kings before him, had failed in their sacred duty. The appealing idea of moving from darkness to light is the presentation of an image or vision of how things might be. I want to say to you that this is entirely our Christian faith and this is why it is so

enduring. We believe that God presents us with a vision of how our lives and our world and the things within it might be and that Jesus Christ is the example to follow if we want things to turn out that way. After many forerunners in the history of Israel, the birth of Jesus is the event in history which makes that hope, trust and joy perfect because all things are possible with God if only we would sometimes get ourselves out of the way.

So don't give up when things don't turn out how you would like. Allow the light to shine into your situation and let it inspire you.

Isaiah is a prophet and prophecy, it has always seemed to me, is about speaking things that need to be said – how scary is that! Who wants to tell the king or the boss that he or she is doing it wrong? Who wants to suggest to a large group of rowdy and confident people that their behaviour is unacceptable. Who wants to be the killjoy by talking of disastrous consequences when everyone is having a good time? Who would relish the task of exposing weaknesses in a system designed to give everyone the best in the best of all possible worlds... The prophetic voice shines light into the dark places of the world and of the human soul and it is often met with resistance because of what it reveals.

So, have you? Seen a great light? What did it reveal to you?

Well, I suppose one of the things that came to me was that Sunday morning here at the Minster is rather an artificial setting. Not that it isn't necessary you understand. It is very, very necessary for us to gather together to be nourished by word, sacrament and good fellowship. Yes, we are gathered together as God's people for worship; yes, we are full of hope and love; yes, we entirely trust each other here and now because of our common and complete trust in God, but our faith is not about being here now. Our faith is about spreading hope and trust and joy in the world out there.

So, let's revisit these three 'yes's': Do we have faith here in our fellow Christians? Do we trust each other completely? Do we feel full of hope and love in the name of Christ Jesus?

Think about it seriously. If you do not feel these things, why not?

The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. Are we that people? Do we know what it means to walk in the light?

Beverley Minster is a big mature church. We occupy a building of great stature which stands to affirm the faithful and to inspire the curious. It is a place of pilgrimage, a place where those who walk in darkness are drawn out of themselves towards the glory of God. It is a place of timeless welcome and refuge in a fast-changing world.

As you know, here at the Minster we are heading for our own time of change. Jeremy is leaving us for pastures new, but we remain here. We are still the church of God in this timeless place. Being what it is, the church elsewhere will take a while to find us a replacement so we'll just have to get on with being church here until that happens. But we don't have to look at our interregnum as a time of gloom and anguish. We don't need to see it as a time of despondency from which we will emerge joyful only once a successor is appointed. We are the people of God and whilst sometimes it might feel distinctly like groping around in the dark, we are actually the means to keep the light shining; we are the witnesses to the hope and trust and joy that comes to us from the Father in heaven. It is our task to keep going the worship, the welcome, the witness and the ministry of this great church and to keep it in the light to shine as a beacon to others. We are the stewards, if you like, of this place until our new incumbent arrives, and when whoever it is does arrive I'd like to be able to welcome

them to lead and develop our vibrant Christian community. We are, and should be, well thought of in the heart of a thriving town, and we should have confident links with and be able to give good witness to the surrounding population. We are many churches together in this town and this unity is to be encouraged. The recent moves to breakdown umpteen centuries of enmity between ourselves and St Mary's must also be continued. If there was ever a case of the hand saying to the eye 'I don't need you' surely those years of discord have been it. We have been entrusted with all the talents and opportunities of which this place is so richly blessed and I for one do not wish to be accused of burying that talent in the ground.

It is our responsibility to walk upright in the light because there are too many people out there who do not know the love of Christ. There are too many who need to see that light, to know the joy and to feel the hope that comes from trust in God and in each other. Too many people are sad, frightened and betrayed; too many are angry and frustrated; too many have been built up only to be knocked down by the hollow message of the world that says you can do anything or be anything you want. You can't! Only by losing ourselves in the will of God in Christ Jesus will any of us become fully alive and we need to affirm this message to others by our actions and the example of our lives.

So in this time of transition we must continue to pray; to share good fellowship, to study our bibles and to give glory to God. We must guard against bickering, slander and all forms of deceit. We must resist the temptation to put the light under the bushel. We must not slide into darkness. There is no need.

The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. That light is here and it is in us. We need to share it so it doesn't go out. So, if we are asked about the Light of the World which overcomes the darkness, I pray that it will shine through each one of us, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.