

John 8:12-38
(Psalm 27; 2 Corinthians 4:1-7)
“The Light of the World”

Introduction

As we saw last week, the wonderful story of Jesus’ mercy toward the woman caught in adultery was almost certainly not in the original version of John’s gospel, yet was universally accepted by the early church as an authentic story from Jesus’ life and ministry. Thus, the opening words of that story, words that would indicate the end of the final day of the Feast of Booths and the start of a new day, are actually intruded into the narrative of the final events of the feast. If the greatest moment of the feast was the sacramental pouring of the water over the altar (that we described two weeks ago), an action that led Jesus to stand up and cry out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink,” then the dramatic moment on the final night of the feast – when the great lamps that had floodlit Jerusalem throughout the week were extinguished and an eerie darkness descended over the city – would provide the moment for Jesus to say, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12). And what is the response to Jesus’ words?

The religious leaders confront Jesus with the obvious question that any thinking person should ask: Why should we believe the incredible, and even outrageous, claims that Jesus made about himself? There has long been a school of thought that holds the disciples responsible for creating stories about Jesus, inflating his claims and putting words into Jesus’ mouth that he never actually spoke. On this view, Jesus was an eloquent first-century rabbi, perhaps even a miracle-worker, who called the people to repentance and righteousness, but who never claimed to be God’s Son or Israel’s Messiah. But if this were true, there would be no reason for his ongoing conflict with the religious leaders, a conflict that led at last to his death. He would simply have been another rabbi in the order of Hillel.

However, the only records that we have, records written by those who knew Jesus and who sacrificed their lives to vindicate their testimony, insist that he claimed things of himself that no good person would dare to claim unless they were true. So here we find Jesus defending his words, his claims and his ministry, and calling us to recognize two essential points if we would know “the light of the world” who reveals the greatest truth of all: the way to be reconciled to God and to share his life forever.

This morning I invite you to stand before Jesus and ask your questions: Why should we believe him? In a world where so many people of good will believe so many different things, where so many different paths to salvation are proclaimed and defended, why should I believe that Jesus is “the light of the world,” much less “the way, the truth and the life,” the only way to be reconciled to God (John 14:6)? Jesus invites our questions and points the way for us to stand confident that his testimony is true.

Body

1. **Jesus points us, first, to *his* cross, which is for his disciples the *objective* vindication of his words, for here we find the *reason* to believe in him (8:28).**

It is significant that this word “lifted up” that John uses repeatedly to describe Jesus’ crucifixion, is the word meaning “exalted.” John is telling us that at the moment that Jesus’ opponents thought that they were destroying him, they were actually enabling him to fulfill his mission, the mission of offering himself in our place as a perfect sacrifice for sin, so that God could forgive us and still remain just and holy. The cross is the vindication both of God’s love and of his righteousness, it is – as the song we sang last week reminded us – the place “where wrath and mercy meet.” And so it is in contemplating the cross and its meaning that we realize how very different from mere religion is the path of life that is opened to us in the gospel of Christ. As Bill Hybels put it with eloquent simplicity, “Religion is spelled D-O. The Gospel is spelled D-O-N-E.”

“When I survey the wondrous cross / on which the Prince of glory died, / my richest gain I count but loss / and pour contempt on all my pride.” Religion leads to pride, “See how good I am!” The gospel leads to humility, “See how great God is!” The Messiah’s cross provides the objective vindication of Jesus’ claims about himself: “I am the bread of life... If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever... If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me ... out of his heart will flow rivers of living water... I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Who dares to speak such words? Only the One who came from the Father’s presence into this world’s darkness in order to save us: “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

2. **But Jesus also points us to *our* cross, which becomes for his disciples the *subjective* vindication of his words, for here we find the *confidence* to believe in him (8:12&31).**

Recognizing the majestic message of the cross of Christ, even having it sear our hearts and lead us to repentance, is still not the same as *knowing* Christ, who is God’s truth in human flesh. And so Jesus reminds us that there is, not only *his* cross that opens the way for us to know God in the loving intimacy for which we were created, but there is also a cross for each of us, and the call to take up our cross daily.

You may be wondering where I find that idea in our text. I find it in these words: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:31). What does it mean to abide in his word?

Just what he said in the opening verse of our text: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12). Following Jesus is the definition of discipleship. We abide in him by being where he is and doing what he does, in other words, by following him. Thus, he said to his disciples on another occasion, “If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?” (Matthew 16:24-26).

It is in following Jesus in the strength he supplies through the gift of his Spirit, it is in finding in one’s own experience day-by-day the truth of his word, it is in taking up our cross and finding that it leads, not to the destruction of our hopes and dreams, but rather to their fulfillment in ways not sullied by our own rebellion and sin, it is here that we find the subjective, existential vindication of the words of Jesus. It is in his company that I know the truth of his word, and am finally set free. Thus he speaks these words: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:32), and this further word: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (8:36).

Conclusion

So Jesus calls to us across the years, saying still to people walking in darkness, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Why should we believe him? How can we believe such things? By patiently contemplating his cross until by grace our hearts are broken at the thought of our rebellion and sin, and our minds are opened to understand the truth of the gospel, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting [our] trespasses against [us]” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Once the gospel comes clear to your heart and mind, step out, don’t delay, cast aside everything that holds you back, and follow Jesus into the light, the clear light that shows you what you’ve been seeking all your life: the way, the truth and the life, the way home, the way back to the Father and to the feast, and to life that never ends.

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved