

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Sunday February 9 2020  
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

# **THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON**

**Sunday 9 February 2020**

**ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER**  
**Matthew 5 13:20**



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Our Gospel reading today challenges us to reflect on the theme of Spiritual Light.

In all its Glory

Its Strengths

Its Subtlety and

Its Surprising Paradoxes

Which Jesus highlighted with unfamiliar metaphors about

Bushels

Lampstands

Hills, Cities and

Darkness

Last Sunday here at St Matthew's we were enjoying the comforting reassuring light of Candlemas.

Amidst beautiful music and flickering candles we listened to the prophecy of Simeon that the baby Jesus he was holding in his arms would be "a light to lighten the Gentiles".

It almost sounded as though we could stay passively in our comfort zone of light leaving God to get on with the work of illuminating the Gentiles.

However, today we are put on our mettle by the much more challenging words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Let your light so shine before men" he exhorts us.

"So that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven"

So, our Gospel readings on successive Sundays have been a contrast between active and passive illumination of our faith.

Now this is a familiar ambivalence among believers.

Do we prefer to practice our faith in twilight?

Or to get out into the uncomfortable heat of the day to do the heavy lifting of discipleship in sunlight?

Are we the contemplative church reticent?

Or the church militant, fighting the good fight in the floodlights of modern Evangelism.

And let's face it there are times when we just don't feel like being shining lights.

There can even be times when, to quote Simon & Garfunkel we prefer to say:

"Hello Darkness My Old Friend".

So, there are paradoxes here.

\* \* \*

Culturally and geographically I grew up in the comparative darkness and austerity of post War East Anglia. In the counties of "silly Suffolk" and "normal for Norfolk"; local worthies speaking with their traditional accents pronounced the opposite of darkness to be "loight".

Top of the hit parade in those days was a pop song from The Singing Postman of Norwich "Hev Yew Gotta Loight Boy?"

And there was a joke doing the rounds in the pubs which sold Cobbold Ales or Tollys Bitter which went like this:

A young man comes into the pub carrying a large lamp.

An old yokel in the pub asks him:

*Hey bor where are yew a goin' with that there loight?*

**Young Man:** *I'm a goin' a courtin'*

**Old Man (scornfully):** *In mine yung daze the last thing yew want'ed when you was goin' a courtin' was to take a loight with you..*

**Young Man:** *Well, when's I look at yours old missus, oi think you wuda dun a darn sight betta if yew 'ad taken a loight!*

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Jesus clearly thought that his disciples and followers should take a light with them and shine it brightly.

He was following in the footsteps of the Old Testament Law and the prophets.

After all the first verse of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis declares "And God said let there be light and there was light."

The Psalms contain many references to light. For instance, Psalm 119 teaches:

*"Let your word word be a lantern to my feet"*

And the prophecies of Isaiah are full of memorable verses on this theme such as:

*"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light".*

This tradition continues into our liturgy our hymnody and into contemporary worship songs such as one of the favourite repetitive choruses in charismatic Evangelical Churches

*"Shine Jesus Shine".*

But let's go deeper today and ask how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we should honour this teaching of Jesus.

*"Let your light shine before men".*

I suggest there are three key steps towards this:

PREPARATION

ILLUMINATION

GLORIFICATION

\* \* \*

In the world of movies, a big box office hit right now showing in cinemas is *The Lighthouse* and one of its subthemes is how thoroughly Lighthouse keepers have to

- prepare their lamps, their generators, their lenses
- and their projectors
- to shine their beams to ships far out to sea.

The imperative need to prepare before we can transmit applies also to the light of our Christian faith. This can be demonstrated by a couple of examples here in this church today.

All this week Father Philip has been away at a retreat for Senior Priests conducted by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

I am sure that the kind of prayerful contemplative teaching at this retreat will help Father Philip prepare to shine many a light in his sermons to us in the coming seasons of Lent and Easter.

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Also on this theme of theological preparation may I say a warm word of welcome to St Matthew's today to a good friend of ours who is visiting from the USA, Peter McDonald.

Peter is Chairman of his family charity the McDonald Agape Foundation, which has a unique record of supporting Christian Scholars, theologians, teaching institutions and innovative ministries on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the UK McDonald Foundation beneficiaries range from Rowan Williams who has just completed a three year spell as Visiting McDonald Professor of Theology at St Mellitus College  
to the Anselm Community at Lambeth Palace  
to the McDonald Centre of Theology, Ethics and Public Life at Oxford University  
and to individual scholarships and projects which now stretch through five universities and theological colleges and even include a new outreach mission to Christian civil servants in Whitehall.

That's a fine record of preparing God's servants to shine their light into the darkness of our secular world.

Yet good preparation is not enough. It has to be matched by good illumination.

Jesus has some telling words to say about this in today's Gospel reading, with his command, strange to our contemporary ears

"Do not hide your light under a bushel"

Now the word bushel here refers to a measuring basket big enough to cover a lamp.

He is describing a light not snuffed out but covered up.

The light is not extinguished, but it is ineffective.

Because it is seen by far too few people. Mainly by people already inside the cover of the bushel.

Isn't the description "inside the cover of the bushel/basket" something of a metaphor for too many inward-looking churches?

Jesus did not want his followers to be clandestine Christians, hunkering down in their private spiritual bunkers.

St Matthew's is certainly not such an introspective bunker. We know that telling the good news is our duty and our joy.

But we do need to keep asking are we doing everything we can to shine as a Christian community?

Could it be for example, that failing to use the most up to date methods of communication on social media about our ministry, our services – is the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of hiding our light under a bushel?

By all means let's stick to the ancient paths as the prophet Jeremiah advised his followers but finding new ways to lighten our darkness along those paths must surely be a good way to glorify our Father who is in heaven.

And so finally to glorification.

There are a multitude of ways to glorify God – privately, corporately, and publicly. Inner lights of the soul can be just as important as outer lights directed to the world.

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Good works are among these lights, provided we remember that they are not our good works, but God's good works manifesting themselves through us.

Individual examples of kindness, if they are inspired by him, Glorify God.  
Individual people who with the help of their private prayerful faith turn away from wrong paths like sin or drug addiction glorify God

Holy celebration of Mass glorifies God.

And beautiful church music glorifies God.

On Tuesday here we had a wonderful example of this with a spectacular Choral Evensong.

No less than 42 singers brought here by a brilliant one woman social media drive by Jessica Stewart, came here to sing a traditional Book of Common Prayer evensong in a do-it-yourself choir of remarkable quality. They were supported by a further congregation of about 20. Most of the 60 plus people here on Tuesday were young and had never been to St Matthew's Westminster before.

So, this was a musical way of letting our light shine. I hope we will have many more such Choral Evensongs bringing light and life into our Church in the year ahead.

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The Sermon on the Mount is full of challenges.

But the gauntlet thrown down by today's Gospel reading, "Let your light so shine before men" is one which as individuals and as a Church we can surely take up and honour.

**Amen**