

## Being the Light of the World

*Promoting the Gospel through Good Works*

Series: **On a Mission from God**

Location: St George's Battery Point

Date: 9 January 2025

Readings: Isaiah 49:5-11; 1 Peter 2:11-17, Matthew 5:1-16

*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

In a TV interview some years ago Australian novelist Tim Winton spoke about how his family became Christians when he was a child. Winton's father was a policeman. And when Winton was 5 his dad was in a terrible accident. He was knocked off his motorcycle by a drunk driver. After weeks in hospital in a coma he was finally allowed home. But there was still a lot of recovery. Winton's dad was a big man, and his mum struggled to bathe him each day. Word of the family's situation got around the local community, and shortly after Winton recalls his mum getting a knock on the door. "G'day. My name's Len," said a stranger. "I heard your hubby's a bit crook. Anything I can do?" Len was from the local church, and Winton said, "He just showed up and he used to carry my dad from bed and put him in the bath and he used to bathe him, which in the 1960s in Perth ... was not the sort of thing you saw every day." This simple act of kindness from a Christian had a powerful effect. Winton said, "It really touched me, in that, regardless of theology or anything else, watching a grown man bother, for nothing, to show up and wash a sick man - you know, it really affected me. This "strangely sacrificial act," as Winton describes it, was the doorway for the whole family to meet Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

This is the 4th in our series *On a Mission from God*, where we're looking at God's mission in this world to be known and worshipped, and how we as the church and as members of the body of Christ can participate in God's mission. The way we talk about that here at St George's is that we're the Light on the Hill. Our mission is to see people Drawn to the Light of Christ, Transformed by the Light of Christ and Sent out to Shine the Light of Christ. We've looked at how we can share in God's mission through giving money generously to the church and elsewhere. Last week we looked at the most powerful way we can share in God's mission, and that is through our prayers. And I hope you've started praying for 4 people using our Pray for 4 bookmark. This week we're looking at how we can share in God's mission through loving our neighbours, through doing all the good God has given for us to do. Or as our vision puts it - being sent out to shine the light of Christ.

This of course is taken from our Jesus' famous words in the Sermon on the Mount that we heard read this morning:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it

---

<sup>1</sup> This story is narrated by John Dickson in *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*, Zondervan, 2010: 97-98

gives light to everyone in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

We're going to explore this and a few other texts of Scripture all of which repeat this theme - shining the light through doing good, along with a few examples to help us imagine what this could look like in our lives, just like how God used Len, gently caring for Tim Winton's father, to introduce the whole family to Jesus. That story by the way is taken from John Dickson's book *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*, which this sermon series is based on. It's a super helpful read.

Let's begin with that picture Jesus uses for doing good. Light. Light is meant to shine in the darkness, bringing hope and life. A light is not a light if it's not shining, distinct from the darkness. Nor does it do its job if it's hidden under a bowl. It's put on a stand and gives light to everyone. That's what Jesus wants for his followers. Not to just care for each other in the church and ignore the rest of the world, but to stand out, to stand tall, and to shine with his light doing all the good he has given us to do. It's why the third movement in our mission is to be *sent out* to shine the light of Christ. It's what we pray at the end of our communion service: "Father we offer our bodies to you as a living sacrifice. *Send us* out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory."

What is the good that God calls us to do? How can we be light? Well if we live out Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that's a good start. And we heard just a bit of it this morning: Being poor in spirit. Being merciful. Hungering for righteousness. Being peacemakers. The rest of the sermon talks about things like guarding against murder and anger, adultery and lust, keeping promises, giving to the poor, not repaying evil for evil, praying for those who persecute you, loving even your enemies. Jesus is fleshing out what it looks like to live out the 10 commandments - our obligations to love God by worshipping him alone, by not making idols, by honouring his name, by resting on the Sabbath; and the call to love our neighbours - by not murdering, being sexually pure, not stealing, not lying, not coveting but being content and trusting God and seeking his kingdom.

Living like this is beautiful and deeply attractive. I love what the apostle Paul says in Titus. You live like this and you "will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive."<sup>3</sup> That word in Titus 2.10 translated "attractive" is the Greek word *kosmeo* from which we get our word cosmetic. It literally means "to make beautiful". That's what we can do with as we shine the light of Christ in this dark world, doing all the good God has called us to do - we make the Good News of Jesus attractive, beautiful to people by how we live.

Some years ago I read a story about Francis Collins, one of the world's leading scientists and head of the team who mapped the human genome. Collins also happens to be a devout Christian. Collins was invited to a dinner party in New York by a friend, who had also invited

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5.14-16

<sup>3</sup> Titus 2.10

the well known atheist Christopher Hitchens. Basically it was a set up for an atheist v Christian debate. Collins and Hitchens graciously obliged, and the meeting became a catalyst for an unlikely friendship. When Hitchens was diagnosed with cancer Collins not only prayed for him, but also lent a hand to see if any medical advances could help. Sadly the cancer won. Collins is also a talented musician (some people get all the breaks!) and he played a song he had written for Hitchens at his funeral. Collins writes, “[Hitchens] never showed any sign of retreating from his atheist position, though his views softened towards those of us who he assumed were caught in a religious delusion.”<sup>4</sup>

In the text we read from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that his followers can expect to face opposition for their faith. I remember people at school thinking I was a weirdo because I went to church. Our culture has moved on from the New Atheism, but some aspects of Christian moral teaching particularly around sexual ethics are seen by many as harmful. You might experience some of that pressure at work, or school, or in your family. Now what we face in Australia is very mild compared to some of our brothers in sisters in countries like North Korea or Saudi Arabia. But Jesus’ words to all his followers are still the same. What does he say? “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

The apostle Peter no doubt heard Jesus’ sermon preached many times. He echoes Jesus’ words in his first letter. 1 Peter 2:12:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Like Jesus, Peter says we can expect opposition. People may accuse us of doing wrong. But how do we respond as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved? By doing good. He goes on in verse 15. “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” What is our best defense against those who accuse us of doing wrong, of believing things that are stupid or harmful? Show by the conduct of our lives and the quality of our character that such accusations are simply not true.

But doing good is not simply to be a defense. It is the life God calls us to. As the body of Christ, we are his hands and feet in the world. God uses us to bring his light into this dark world. The New Testament calls us Christ’s ambassadors. What does an ambassador do? Represents their home country on foreign soil. We are citizens of Christ’s kingdom. We represent him in this world. We are often the only Bible that people will read. We are the Christ that people will see. That is a terrifying thought! And yet, at the same time, such is God’s majesty and grace that he delights to work through weak and frail people like you and me to shine forth his glory in the power of the Holy Spirit. When you do good, when you forgive someone who has wronged you, when you care for someone in need, when you show yourself to be a person of integrity under pressure, all of these things are the light of Christ shining brightly to God’s glory!

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.templetonprize.org/laureate-sub/address-by-dr-francis-s-collins/>

And what does the apostle Peter say? What does Jesus say? When people see your good deeds, they will glorify your Father in heaven. That is, they will turn to God in worship. The good that you do makes the Good News of Jesus beautiful. It is an incredibly powerful way God uses you to show people Jesus and to draw them to respond to him in love and worship.

How and where are we to do good? Paul says “to all as we have opportunity”.<sup>5</sup> It’s interesting that in both 1 Peter and Titus we see Jesus’ command first applied in the home - between husbands and wives, young men and women, and then in what you might call the workplace - with instructions to Christians who are slaves. That’s where it starts. Being patient with your sister or that annoying colleague. Honouring your teachers. Not repaying insult with injury. Working hard, even when our bosses are not watching us because we’re working for the Lord. Caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner. And who knows, God may give you the vision and opportunity to make a huge difference in this world. I think of Catherine Hamlin, an Australian doctor who set up a hospital in Ethiopia offering free healthcare for women suffering injuries in childbirth. Or William Wilberforce, working for a lifetime to abolish slavery in the British Empire. Or Martin Luther King Jr. leading the Civil Rights movement in the US. Or lawyer Gary Haugen in the US founding International Justice Mission to stop international sex trafficking. Or Len, bathing Tim Winton’s dad. All doing these things in Jesus’ name.

Now it’s interesting that when Jesus says “You are the light of the world”, the “you” here is plural. That is he is speaking to us as the church. And you know what, the church through the ages has obeyed Jesus’ command and shone his light by loving their neighbours. In the book of Acts we read about the infant church having a daily distribution of food to those in need in Jerusalem, to the point where they had to appoint 7 deacons to coordinate this. We know that by AD 250 the church in Rome was supporting over 1500 destitute people every day.<sup>6</sup> All over the ancient world churches set up hospitals, orphanages and food programs that were available for everyone, believers and unbelievers alike.

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark seeks to answer the question of how Christianity took over the Roman empire in a mere 300 years. In his chapter on cities he writes,

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 6.10

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43.11

<sup>7</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins, 1997: 161

His conclusion is that it was because Christians lived out the central teaching of Jesus, not least to love your neighbour as yourself, that the Roman empire became Christian.

The early church lived out Jesus' words - they let their light shine, and in doing so converted an empire and changed the world. It's so hard for us to recognise just how revolutionary and strange Jesus' ethic of loving your neighbour as yourself is because we live downstream from that conversion. As historian Tom Holland has argued in his influential and popular book *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, Christian ethics have entered the bloodstream of Western Culture to the point where we unconsciously take them for granted as our standard for our moral sensibilities.

In a culture that has forgotten its past, Jesus' words still call us as the church - to let our light shine, so that people may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. And churches are still making a difference today. Anglicare is the largest provider of social welfare in Tasmania. I recently came across Loaves and Fishes, a Christian not for profit here in Tassie set up to take food from growers that would otherwise be wasted and provide it to those facing food insecurity. They also train at-risk youth in their kitchens to give them skills and confidence to get long term work.

Corporately we seek to do this through our partnership with Anglicare, through our extending hospitality to our neighbours in Pancakes, coming up on March 4, and through making a thoughtful contribution to our public life in the Henry Baldwin lecture. I think we can still grow in this area. But individually we're also sent out each week to shine Christ's light. That starts in our families, friendships and workplaces. But I also love how different people from St George's volunteer with things like Hobart City Mission and Fostering Hope. The lives we live are the only Bible that many people will read.

I remember hearing J. John, an evangelist from the UK, give his evangelistic strategy. It's very simple. Pray; Care; and then Share. We heard about praying for our friends and family last week. Today has been all about Caring. Loving our neighbours. Doing good to all. Living such good lives amongst our pagan neighbours that though they accuse us of doing wrong they will see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. Over the next 2 weeks we'll look at how we can share our faith, or as the apostle Peter puts it, "give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have."<sup>8</sup> We don't love our neighbours as a means to conversion. It's not a bait and switch. We love them because God loves them. We do good because God calls us to shine his light in this world and brings honour to his name. And we do so because God first loved us and gave his Son for us. But as we love our neighbours, we pray that in God's mercy, by the power of the Spirit, they would catch a glimpse of the God who loves them and so be drawn to him.

*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

---

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 3.15