



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop gave the sermon as part of the Christmas Day Sung Eucharist service at York Minster. This follows in full:

The service was also livestreamed and can be watched [*here*](#)

The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—

on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9.2)

If I'd bothered to jot it down in my diary, I could tell you the exact date that my eyesight started conking out and I had to get reading glasses. It was about 20 years ago.

One morning I went to Morning Prayer, opened the book as usual, and found the words were blurring together. I rubbed my eyes, adjusted the distance between them and the page and everything was fine for a while.

When, a few months later I discovered my arms weren't long enough, I went for an eye test and – as you can see – have been wearing reading glasses ever since. Many of you will have had a similar experience.

However, there is something else I have experienced that came to light – quite literally – as I pondered Isaiah's famous words about light shining in the darkness and thought also of the great prologue to St John's Gospel and what he says about the true light that shines in Christ.

When I sit and read outside in bright sunlight, I don't always need my reading glasses. It is as if my eyesight has been restored.

There is, of course, a scientific reason for this. Just like a camera, your eyes can see more clearly and with a deeper focus when more light is available. The aperture of your pupil contracts, enabling you to see things with greater clarity and focus. Moreover, the source of that light, the Sun, has the full spectrum of light which is simply missing from most artificial, interior lighting.

Perhaps I could explain it this way: imagine for a moment if light were a Christmas dinner, then natural sunlight is a beautiful roast goose with prunes and stuffing and all the trimmings and washed down with a fine glass of St-Emilion; and indoor lighting is a plate of turkey twizzlers and a guzzle of coke.

The true light, says John, the light that enlightens everyone, the light that carries the full spectrum of light, the light that clarifies and sharpens our focus, enabling us to see things as they truly are, even to see ourselves, is coming into the world.

This is the beautiful, but also slightly uncomfortable and challenging, message of Christmas. It is worth celebrating but first let's consider that the child in the manger is reconfiguring the aperture through which we will see the world and our part in it.

We will no longer be stumbling around in the darkness, relying upon ourselves. We will be able to see clearly how we're supposed to live and who we are as the 'now beloved and adopted children of God.'

This light is also judgement, for Jesus says that "the light has come into the world, but people preferred darkness" (see John 3.19) or, perhaps, even if we don't actually prefer the darkness, we do prefer to go indoors where the light isn't so good and where we can pretend that everything is okay.

However, the light that clarifies and reveals is telling us things about ourselves and things about the world. It's helping us see the full picture. The words we need to see are unjumbling themselves.

Therefore what we have to ask is what is this light revealing, hard though it may be for us to face this?

Perhaps this -

- It isn't right that there are people sleeping rough on our streets. Why haven't we seen them?
- It isn't right that vaccines are freely available in wealthy countries like ours, but barely available to the poorest of the world. How have we allowed this to happen?
- It isn't right that some children, even in this country, will have no presents round the tree today, nor a decent meal on the table. How come we have ignored that?
- It isn't right that accidents of birth and upbringing go such a long way to pre-determine the whole trajectory of life, so that a child growing up in Middlesbrough or Blackpool will even have a much lower life expectancy than someone growing up in Kensington.
- And if this child is Prince of Peace, and if the angels sang there will be peace on earth, then it isn't right that at a time when the mood across the world is to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons, we as a nation are contemplating increasing the destructive capacity of our own, and spending an estimated £8,000 a minute to keep the ones we've got.
- It isn't right that small beleaguered, and now very fearful, Christian congregations in Bethlehem and Jerusalem are getting smaller because intolerance has turned to persecution.
- It isn't right that we all know we must change our habits and reduce our carbon footprint and eat less meat, but we do not change. We have

preferred the blurred vision of things as they are, than the clarifying, uncomfortable, challenging light of Christ.

And we may disagree on how to address these things and put them right, but for too long we have allowed councils of despair to dominate our thinking in a kind of blurred vision of the world where we shrug our shoulders and say ‘this is just the way things are, any hope for the world is a foolish dream, just make the best of things, change isn’t possible.’

Dear Sisters and Brothers, the birth of Christ changes everything.

God’s light dawns upon the world, showing us where we have gone wrong and showing us, in Christ, what getting it right looks like. For a child is born for us and authority rests upon his shoulder and his name is Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

What can I say to you this Christmas morning, but turn to him? Let his light shine on you. Ask to have your vision expanded, that you may see the world as he sees it, for his vision for his world is the world’s greatest hope for the human race to live in peace and love one another and – if you will excuse the political jargon – build back better.

We are all exhausted by the horrors and privations of Covid. Our world cries out.

I do hope you will have a happy Christmas. And I hope you are able to get together with those you love today, even – as it will be the case with some of my family - it’s on yet another zoom conference. Most of all I hope and pray that in your hearts and imaginations, and even now in this holy Eucharist, you will come to the stable at Bethlehem.

You will come - surprised like the shepherds; doggedly faithful like Joseph; defiantly rejoicing like Mary; amazed like the Magi, and have your life re-directed. Changed, because in this great light you will not just see things differently, you will see them as they truly are, as they are meant to be, at last having the focus of your life shifted, enabling you to see the clear, pure beauty of Christ.

God of God. Light of light. Begotten, not created. O come, let us adore him.

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