

Sermon – Sunday 24th December 2017 – Midnight

I wonder how you would feel right now if I told you that the spotlight is on you. Just take a moment to think. Now, it's nearly midnight and I'm guessing one or two of you have had a drink, so perhaps for some of you the answer would be "bring it on". I wouldn't be surprised if there are people here who enjoy performing, who like nothing better than being in the spotlight. But I will pretty much guarantee that there are people here who don't. For some of you, the idea of the light being turned on you is the worst thing ever. Being centre of attention just isn't your thing.

One of the lovely things about this time of year is seeing the children from Cuddington and Linden Bridge schools coming here to St. Mary's for their carol services, and one thing I absolutely love is watching that wonderful mixture of children, some standing at the front, reading clearly or singing their hearts out; some fidgeting, looking at their feet as though they'd probably rather not be at the front.

To take the idea a little deeper, let's think a bit more about being under the spotlight. That phrase suggests more in the way of scrutiny. I wonder whether some of those of you who would be perfectly happy to get up here and give us a rendition of White Christmas would find the idea of being under scrutiny much less comfortable.

There are so many things that can make the idea of being under the spotlight feel uncomfortable. That internal voice questioning whether we're good enough. Sometimes it can feel as though a lot of life involves a game of not being found out – if we just keep going, maybe no-one will realise that we aren't the perfect employee, parent, partner, whatever.

In our readings this evening we hear that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. The birth of Jesus is described as the light coming into the world. And there is that beautiful phrase that this is the true light, which enlightens everyone.

So what might it mean if Jesus is the true light, which enlightens everyone? Is this the equivalent of having the spotlight turned on us? Does this mean that all that creeping self-doubt which we've kept carefully hidden is going to be unearthed?

You'll be pleased to know that my answer to that is a resounding "no".

And the reason that the "no" resounds is that it is a "no... and..."

There is no doubt about the message – in Jesus there is indeed light and life and truth. And – and this is just as important – there is no need to be afraid.

So when I say that this is not about the spotlight being turned on us so that our inadequacies are revealed, what I don't mean is that fortunately the light is dim enough that our darker corners remain hidden. What I mean is something far, far more important. What I mean is that those darker corners are indeed known – God does indeed know and understand exactly who you are, and exactly what you are like. God notices you. God knows you. And – the important bit coming up – God loves you.

There isn't an asterisk. God loves you if only you were a little more confident; if only you were a little less confident; if only you didn't get annoyed at small things; if only you were calmer; if only you were more ambitious.

Just this. God notices you. God knows you. God loves you.

And there is more. Because the love, light and truth that Jesus shows us does in fact transform. I wonder if you can take that deep breath and really understand that you don't need to be afraid of being found out. Because God knows anyway. There is no need for you to be anything other than who you are – who you beautifully are, made and loved by God.

For each of us to rest in that knowledge really can be transformational. It can be so hard to believe in a light which notices us but not to criticise, simply to love and to long for us to be all that we can be. How often if we receive an email asking to speak to us do we assume that we've done something wrong? But the ping of God's email is simply to say that you're noticed and loved.

Earlier this month I went to the funeral of a young man of 19 who had been born with a life-limiting condition. Among his symptoms was early onset dementia which meant that he would never hit the kind of targets young people are set in their education. Nevertheless he lived a full life, taking joy in particular in music – he was a great fan of Abba; making good friends; engaging in charming conversations with all kinds of people. His funeral was both the most joyful and the most tearful I have ever attended. What stood out, though, was people really knew Matthew. We could all identify those aspects of his personality that made him who he was – his delightful sense of humour; his desire to perform at any moment; his need for routine and his astonishing recollection of everything that would be done in any day. Moreover knowing Matthew had brought joy to each one of us – he quite literally lit up our lives.

And what knowing Matthew has also taught me is that there isn't a blueprint for how any one of us should be. In the light of God's love there is no expectation or desire for us to be anything other than who we are – known, noticed and loved by God. It always felt to me that Matthew lived out that truth – he was always beautifully himself, and by being himself he touched lives.

When we hear at Christmas that the light has come into the world, do also hear those words "do not be afraid." This is not a spotlight designed to find us out or to pass judgement. This is the gracious, beautiful light that sees us for who we are; notices all we are; and loves us for who we are. And as such it is a light which transforms. I love those glow in the dark stars which some children have stuck on their bedroom ceilings (or at least they did some years ago!) In order to glow, they need to see some light, but then when it is dark, they give light. Once we know the love and light of Christ, we too can live in that kind of glow, lighting the way for one another.

Amen