

Letting Your Light Shine

*Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven".
(Matthew 5:14)*

People all around us observe the way we live. When we say we are Christians they often take a more critical look. Our lifestyle is the most powerful indicator of whether Jesus Christ is real to us and relevant in our daily experiences. Our actions speak louder than personal theologies and creeds. When others watch, they rarely do so because they are innately supportive or hostile. More often their motivation is to see what "works" for us, because they too are searching for viable answers to life and the questions and pressures it throws up. Christian witness that reflects God's faithfulness and presence glorifies Him and creates hope in a world that is looking to find a way out of the darkness.

When the lights go out

I was woken up by the sound of gunfire in the street. As I carefully walked out onto the balcony and looked up into the night sky all I could see were the tracers of Syrian anti-aircraft fire aimed at fighter jets sent from neighbouring Israel to destroy Lebanon's electricity infrastructure. The building shook as the sound barrier was broken above the capital. In an instant, the apartment was plunged into complete darkness. I waited for a few minutes, until the generator kicked in and the lights came on again – at least in our building. Many of our neighbours' homes were left in darkness. When the morning dawned it was revealed that the three largest power plants in the country lay in ruins. The authorities would take years to rebuild them. The Government condemned the attack, but the damage was already done. People with generators in their homes and offices resigned themselves to using them for a long time to come.

We live in a dark world. There is nothing so dark as when the lights go out and the only thing you can do is grope for something to hang onto, hoping it is secure. When this happens, the darker the environment, the stronger the smallest light appears. Even a torch or match seem magnified and are able to change their surroundings. In parts of outback Australia, the stars seem brighter when the city lights are dimmest; astronomers come from around the world to witness stellar events that are invisible through the clouds or atmospheric pollution in their own countries.

Before Jesus came into the world, there was no effective light for the human condition. It wasn't always like that, however – the human race was created to live in God's presence, but chose rebellion over obedience and the light figuratively went out. Hope was extinguished. As a result, men and women are trapped in the dark (Isaiah 60:2) and their lifestyles reflect this fact (John 3:19). Solomon said that, "the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble." (Proverbs 4:19) No wonder the human story seems to lurch from one crisis to another.

Some people talk about living “according to their lights”. One (non-Christian) religion even calls itself “Divine Light”. Such subjectivity is deceptive. For centuries, armies have marched off to war, people have been burned at the stake and atrocities have been committed by people claiming they were walking in the light. The results have been disastrous and are still with us. Mediaeval churches proclaiming the power of Christian tradition are gloomy and cold inside, the thick walls preventing natural light getting in, a powerful analogy of organised religion that pursues externalities rather than life. As a consequence, those who attended them were benighted for centuries. After the so-called Dark Ages came the “Enlightenment”, when reformers cast off the “shackles” of religious legalism but in the process abandoned Biblical faith. The fundamental question, “Where am I going?”, continues to remain unanswered for many who remain in the dark.

Lights in the darkness

“Light” is used in the Bible to refer to Godly understanding and a dynamic relationship with Him, out of which a different kind of lifestyle flows. “He has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). The Bible teaches us that, whereas we walked in “darkness” before we became Christians, now we are “children of the light” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). We are called to let our light shine.

This represents a total change. While the world as we know it suffers the terrible consequences of people living according to their lights (but devoid of God), John’s Gospel tells us that when Jesus came he shone the light and the darkness fled (John 1:5; 3:19). “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2). Without the light that Christ brings into the world, there is no hope. When he comes, like the morning sun, he illuminates everything.

What does that analogy mean for you and me?

In museums, antique shops and flea markets from one end of Europe to the other it is possible to see ancient Greek and Roman oil lamps, preserved for posterity in fixed displays or on sale. (Often illegally. Be on the look-out for counterfeits.) Some are decorated. Most are plain, functional and economical. Pour oil in at one end; light the other and the house is illuminated. Whatever their shape or quality, they had one original purpose: to provide light.

Jesus claimed that he was the “Light of the World” (John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). Speaking to His disciples he took the picture one step further, saying that they too were lights in their world (Matthew 5:14). “He who follows me will not walk in darkness” (John 8:12). We can be lights in the places where we live, work, love and play.

God is at work in the world through His people. His mission is our mission. Bearing witness to the reality and power of God in a world that denies him – or has serious doubts about whether He exists or cares – is our purpose. Christian faith and love in action are our Constitution. Our lives become signposts that point others to Christ. The Christian community is evidence of the Kingdom of God present and at work.

This is the reason Christians need to get involved in social action, working for justice for the oppressed in Jesus' name. It is why Christians should seek positions of service, not to pontificate but to fulfill God's broad plan on a practical level. We are who we are because of our relationship with God. We have His life in us. Without Him we have no strength. If we are true followers of Jesus, our lives will reflect the difference. Our "works" (ie our actions) will be the works of Him who has sent us (John 5:36), our focus will be different.

Think about it: the way we live reflects more about what we value than anything we say. You and I may be the only lights in the darkness of our workplace, home, university or squash court. If our Christian experience is to mean anything at all to those around us, it must be capable of bringing light, understanding, meaning, clarity and direction to such a degree that others are attracted to Christ.

We are called to be Christians in different walks of life, making a difference in the same way Jesus did, taking the initiative, drawing on His power and character to shine where others normally only experience darkness.

Good works - shining by the way we live

What did Jesus mean by "good works"? Only God is good (Mark 10:18). What Jesus was implying was that those whose hearts have been made new and are in relationship with Him are able to do good as well. He wasn't saying that faith depends on works (cf Ephesians 2:8, 9). Quite the contrary. He was teaching that God's children should, produce fruit consistent with his life and character, because they are "born" of Him (1 John 3:19, 4:7). As Christians, you and I carry the divine DNA (2 Peter 1:4). We are Christ's representatives in a non-Christian world. Our lives are capable of reflecting His character and bringing glory to His name, so that unbelievers (perhaps for the first time in their lives), come to believe that God is real and honour and seek Him.

Good works are not just "feel good" intentions and resolutions. I see lots of people genuinely trying to do good works and make a difference, in refugee camps, post-tsunami recovery, working with troubled children, aged care, protecting the environment and in many other worthy areas, where Christians should be involved. Most are well intentioned. (From what I have seen over the years, Christians tend to get involved in works of charity more than non-Christians and go to trouble spots others avoid. The irony is that the response is often, "We like your good works, just leave Christianity out of it". What such critics failure to acknowledge is that Christian faith is the major motivator in the first place.)

However, there is an added dimension to what Christians are asked to do. We are called, not to rely on the nature of our works, personally striving to do better for its own sake, but to get involved in human endeavour because that is what Jesus would do. In effect, our lives are mirrors of the reality of Jesus, reflecting Him in our lives. We do what is "right", because we are God's children; because He has touched our hearts. Our objective priorities are based on the character of our "Father in heaven".

Whatever we do, people watch and assess us, work out what's important to us, what we are like in Main Street life, what's real, how we handle pressures and problems and whether we have integrity.

The downside is that, if we are careless, people who see our works may not want anything to do with God. Living in the Muslim world I often heard claims that generically associated "Christians" with the immorality, drugs, alcohol abuse and more decadent features of the West. In Lebanon, where religious affiliation is officially determined at birth and is entered on peoples' birth certificates, I met "Christians" who had gone head to head with Muslims and Druze adherents during the long civil war enemies and killed men, women and children in the name of their church communities. These are not the works of men and women who walk in the light of Jesus.

A lot of human effort is motivated by hidden agendas, such as the need to look good, to appear "together", to draw attention to self and to be visible to others. The true Christian life is not about "theatrical goodness". Jesus criticized the Pharisees for performance-based religion. They routinely fasted, gave tithes of all they had (even their garden herbs), flagellated themselves, wore signs of their piety on their clothes and heads (verses written on parchment were bound in rolls called "phylacteries" and worn on their foreheads) and did organized works of charity. They did it to be seen and admired or respected by others (Matthew 6:1; 23:5). Good works motivated by unregenerated hearts have faulty foundations. Genuine light is not contrived or forced; it just "is". Human religion and God's way are incompatible.

Hidden lights don't shine

We are to let our light shine before men.

In parts of the Middle East Christian hermits live in caves, as members of their orders have done for centuries. They separate from the world, so that they can live out their days in solitude and meditation and fulfill promises made to God or church superiors. In some cultures, living underground used to be a consequence of persecution. I have visited "underground cities" in central Turkey where entire communities lived seven or eight stories below the surface because of fear of Turkish invaders during the 18th and 19th centuries. Surviving underground provided warmth, security and protection from death or forced conversion to Islam. The only problem is: that mentality still exists in many communities. People live in metaphorical caves that hide the light they are capable of giving out. If our light is hidden, it can't be seen by those who need it most (Matthew 5:14). We are called to be the "light of the world", not the "light of the church".

Like hermits, we sometimes feel like fleeing the company of others and living alone, away from the hassles and stresses of life. King David once said that he wished he had the wings of a dove; then he would "fly away and be at rest" (Psalm 55:6). However, real life doesn't work that way. We are where God has placed us. He gives perspective to function within that framework.

You and I need to be "out there", where people reside, not ensconced in traditions, programs and prejudices, for their own sake, but living out Christian faith in our respective cultures. Otherwise the Gospel is "hidden" from those around us (2 Corinthians 4:3). The only way they can see it is by God's

enabling, in our lives. Paul says that we should be “living epistles”, open and read by others (2 Corinthians 3:2).

You may be the only Christian in your circle of influence. If there is a chasm between what you declare and how you live, your dialogue will be stifled, your integrity compromised. I have seen work environments where “Christians” have made me cringe and unbelievers have been “turned off” because their loud faith is negated by the brashness of their lifestyles. There is nothing wrong with “signs” of faith in the work environment, as long as we are aware that people go on to judge our lives by our actions, not our declared values.

As anyone in Christian communication knows, what we say is not always understood by others. Our words are usually filtered through the thought worlds of our hearers and imply what they want them to mean. This is why personal example is more important than mere words in reaching paradigms radically different from our own. The effectiveness of our witness is only as strong as our relationship with Jesus.

It is not about us

Someone once challenged me, “If you were brought before a court, accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

The way we live says it all. In some countries, the only effective testimony Christians have is their lives. The thing that impacts non-Christians most profoundly isn’t the wisdom of our church councils and boards, the intellectual force of our synods or the professionalism of our worship services, but the transformation in the way we live, how we cope with adverse circumstances thrown up by life, how we treat them and how we relate to our neighbours (John 8:31, 13:35).

Having said that, it is not “all about us”. God’s purpose is never about the light *per se* (Isaiah 42:8); it is not about our works, or how brightly we shine, but His glory and the redemption of sinners through the sacrifice of Jesus.

A friend who collects rocks has the following sign posted above his display cases: “Give glory not to the stones, but to God who created them”. Without such a reminder he might be tempted to focus on the workmanship and gems and miss the Maker altogether.

Lights don’t advertise themselves. Their purpose is not to draw people to their beauty. Light work best when they are just being “lights”. They don’t “try harder” to shine, nor do they develop bad attitudes about those whose paths they illuminate. Christian life isn’t about stressing or striving to be better or live up to an external standard; it is about “being” (Ephesians 5:8).

A lot of Christian activities seem designed to bring people to programs, systems, teachers and traditions. But, we are not called to deify human effort. The real purpose should be to glorify God. When we emphasise our own works we cease to be relevant. Christian witness is about drawing attention to the Light of the World. Only He can bring light into peoples’ lives. Only He can make a difference. Our message is nothing if it is not Christo-centric. In fact, it is not even Christian. Lots of church buildings are “Dedicated to the glory of God”. In the final analysis, what brings glory to God is not a building

but the foundations and principles established in your life, my life, reflecting our Heavenly Father.

Re-kindling the light

Finally, what happens when the oil runs low, lights flicker and threaten to go out? Lamps can (and do) go out: they can be swamped by water or starved of oxygen. The light can go out in peoples' lives because they feel swamped by circumstances and other peoples' attitudes and doubts, or starved of faith, hope and love. The strongest Christian sometimes feels that his or her example is less than perfect. Fuel gives out, life gets out of balance, we get tired and circumstances seem to work against us. In parts of the world, letting one's Christian light shine means being exposed to persecution.

Some peoples' hearts, lives and relationships burn out because they rely on their own works. Others give until it hurts, then give more, but are not renewed, so their reserves become depleted. I know someone whose personal philosophy is, "I'd rather burn out than rust out". That approach is wrong-headed. Burned out lives do not glorify God. It is better to take a break, have a rest, recuperate and be re-filled for the next challenges. Some Christians feel it is sinful to relax, that they will someone "fail" God and their Christian friends if they don't keep going with the program, but even God rested from His creative works (Hebrews 4:10). Jesus took time out. We can still glorify God when our lives are not filled with frenetic church business and the mindless pursuit of other peoples' expectations. Don't confuse activity with spirituality, like a Queanbeyan pastor friend at the end of his rope who admitted to me that he was worn out and had stopped hearing from God and only read the Bible to look for sermon material. If we reach this point, there remains only a short step to spiritual and emotional shipwreck. This does not glorify God. It is time to get back to basics and "be" the children of God.

You and I are as vulnerable as the person next door. We are exposed to temptation just like everyone else (1 Corinthians 10:13). We experience the same problems and frustrations as others. Sometimes things get in the road and the light is not as well diffused as it should be. We don't "feel" that we shine very well. We feel our example flickering. We don't get re-supplied.

If we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the light of the world, faith will rise, hope will be rekindled and the flame will be stirred to life. People around us will see the results and be attracted to Jesus. Then they will be convinced our faith is relevant and "works" in real life.

"God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Wherever you are in the world, however murky the darkness around you feels (it may be dark indeed), whatever your station in life, relative advantage or disadvantage, gender or age, you can make a difference. People *do* notice. They *do* compare and evaluate what's important deep down. You may be the only genuine Christian they know. If you are close to Jesus and allow his light and life to flow through you, the impact on their lives can be powerful and can have eternal consequences. This is more than simply adhering to a Christian

culture. It is a total way of life. The Holy Spirit is ready and waiting to show you how to make it a practical and immediate reality.