

Sermon 12 July 2026 | John 8: 12-18 | Genesis 1:2-3;14-19 | Jonathan Chaplin

- ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’
- this is the second of the seven ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel that we’re working through these Sunday mornings¹
- but at first sight Jesus’s statement seems to come rather out of the blue
- it comes right after the story called in modern Bibles ‘the woman caught in adultery’ - but which should really be called ‘the men caught in hypocrisy’
- Jesus’s claim ‘I am the light of the world’ doesn’t at first sight seem to follow from that story – and scholars tell us that the story was probably a late insertion into the text, and a disputed one – at least by the men who were deciding on the canon
- It flows better if we read as continuing from the end of chapter 7, which ends with a passage called ‘the unbelief of those in authority’ – that’s also the theme of our passage – the Pharisees questioning Jesus’s right to make that statement and trying to use the law against him
- so why is Jesus claiming to be ‘the light of the world’? and more importantly, why *now*? what is happening that evokes these words from Jesus at this point in the narrative?
- let me share some important pieces of information about the Festival
- Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees in our passage comes towards the end of longer account of Jesus’s presence at the Festival of Booths/Tabernacles (7:10) – otherwise known as Sukkot - described in Leviticus 23 (vv 33.43)
- this is one of three great pilgrimage festivals celebrated in Jesus’s time (and still today)
- so, picture Jerusalem: it’s heaving with excited visitors, and for a whole week the Temple would be alive with all kinds of joyful liturgical events, celebrations and meals
- this Festival celebrated God’s protection of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings – the ‘booths’ or temporary shelters reminded people of the fragile, portable tents they lived in during those many years of wandering
- it was a moment for the people to recall their dependence on God’s provision for them at a time of great uncertainty and vulnerability
- and to help the people recall that it was celebrated in autumn at the end of the harvest – so it was also called the Festival of Ingathering
- but there’s also a disturbing counter-story in John’s account:
- while the festival was supposed to be a time of joy and celebration, John tells us (in chapter 7) that it’s been darkened by an atmosphere of threat – some of the Pharisees and chief priests have already ordered the Temple police to arrest Jesus

¹ Seven ‘I am’ sayings: bread of life; light of world; door; good shepherd; resurrection and life; way, truth and life; true vine

- Jesus, who originally tells his family he's not coming, then surprises everyone by showing up, and begins teaching the people inside the Temple, making audacious claims about himself and God, and accusing the leaders of not keeping the law of Moses
- once again Jesus is stirring up huge controversy at the heart of the religious establishment; he's attracting many followers, and the authorities are rattled
- so that's the setting in which our passage occurs
- one of the most dramatic liturgical elements of this festival was the 'celebration of lights' or 'the Illumination of the Temple'
- in the evenings, four enormous pillars, menorahs, would be lit at the top with fires inside the Temple grounds, casting a spectacular light in the Temple and beyond it across the city - an extraordinary light show
- this was to remind the people of the pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings, providing much-needed light in the darkness of the desert and pointing the way to their future in the Promised Land, over the horizon
- the encounter in our passage seems to take place at the end of this festival, so Jesus is addressing a crowd, probably still in the vicinity of the Temple, already pumped up by this week-long ceremony of lights
- and it's precisely here that he declares: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'
- I am the one who will flood not only Jerusalem, not only Israel, but the whole world, with the light of God
- the light that God gave your ancestors in the desert – I am that light, says Jesus
- hardly a claim designed to lower the temperature, given that he was already under an arrest warrant
- many in his audience would also know that in the Jewish scriptures 'light' meant 'salvation' – the salvation of the people of God from their enemies and their liberation to serve God
- they'd be steeped in passages like the one in Isaiah that we read in Advent, where God promises 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in deep darkness – on them has the light shined' (9:2); and God goes on to promise that the 'child' to be born would establish peace, justice and righteousness across the world
- so Jesus is saying: I am the one who God has sent to lead you out of the darkness of the desert, of oppression, of exile, and into the light of salvation, liberation, justice – into the 'light of life'
- nobody would have missed the meaning - not least those sections of the religious establishment who were determined to shut his light down
- remember, that was not all Jewish leaders: just before our passage, Nicodemus shows up again – the Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, who in chapter 3 came to meet Jesus at night, under cover of darkness
- here he is again appealing to his fellow leaders to at least give Jesus a fair hearing according to law

- Nicodemus is one of those many Jews who has been glimpsing the light, finding himself irresistibly drawn to it, struggling to work out what that light means for his own status as a respected public figure, and for the nation of which he is a custodian and its law – which was also often described as ‘light’
- so Jesus’ audience knew that passage from Isaiah; they knew that light meant salvation
- they would also know our first reading from Genesis 1: ‘let there be light’ – where God floods the universe with light, creating the sun and moon to give light and warmth to the whole of creation
- and here’s another intriguing detail of the Festival of Booths: each morning at dawn, the priests moved to the east of the Temple, where the sun rose, to welcome its light
- but then they turned away from the sun, back towards the centre of the Temple, which represents God’s dwelling, and declared, ‘our eyes are turned toward the Lord’ – every morning during the festival
- in doing so they were refusing idolatry – the idolatry of sun-worship which the pagan nations around Israel had practiced, and to which Israel itself had once succumbed, as a result falling into terrible violence and injustice (Ezekiel 8:16)
- when creatures worship another creature instead of the Creator, when they commit idolatry, they inevitably turn on each other
- so the priests turning back to the Temple at first light was a dramatic reminder that God alone is the source of all light, all salvation, all justice
- so Jesus is not God’s first light: in creation God has already flooded the world with the light of his wisdom, joy and goodness – and that light has never been switched off
- but we God’s wayward creatures have found ourselves again and again ‘walking in darkness’, so we need to be brought back into God’s light
- we often instinctively recoil from that light, because it exposes the darkness inside us
- and our institutions and leaders also recoil from it – just as the accusers of the woman caught in adultery, calling for her death, slunk away as their hypocrisy is exposed by the light of Jesus’s mercy
- but our resistance to the light isn’t the last word: John opens his Gospel by announcing, ‘What has come into being through Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (vv.3-5)
- so this is the faith of the church – this stumbling, fumbling, fellowship of partially-sighted Christ-followers
- our faith, however fragile our grasp of it, is that Jesus is indeed the light of the *whole world*, and that whoever follows Jesus will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life
- and the church in every age is called to testify to that, in word and deed, to bear witness that the light of God in Jesus Christ is the world’s only true hope of salvation, liberation, justice, love, reconciliation

- so wherever we see true light, we're invited to welcome it, and to invite people to seek its ultimate source
- as Jesus says to his followers: 'You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matt. 5: 14-16).
- Amen