

Sunday School Notes for 5 March: I am the Light of the World (John 9:5)

We don't really think about darkness while the sun is shining and while we have electric switches to light up the dark corners of our homes. But when load-shedding is scheduled, we make sure we have candles or lanterns or torches so that we won't bump into things in the darkness.

Perhaps this helps us to understand what it must have been like long ago, when there was no electricity. Houses generally had only very small windows as there was no glass and the people wanted to keep out the cold. So we can imagine how dark they must have been! While richer people could afford oil for lamps, poor people just had to make sure that they completed their chores in the daylight. Imagine how often mothers must have had to say, "Hurry up and finish that job. It will be dark soon!"

This meant that when Jesus described himself as the 'Light of the World', the people would have understood far more than we do just how difficult it was to live without light.

And they would also have known that there were lots of times in Jewish history when God had shown himself as light. In fact the very time when Jesus made this statement was at a time when the whole nation was remembering that God had provided light to lead them through the wilderness after they left Egypt. Then God had showed himself as a pillar of fire that they could follow in the dark. All Jewish men over the age of 12 would have gone up to Jerusalem for this celebration and one of the first signs that they were getting near the city was that they would see the big fires burning on the roof of the temple to represent that pillar of fire to light the way through the wilderness.

As Jesus claimed that he was the "light of the world", he did another of his great 'signs' or miracles: he gave light to a blind man's eyes. And not just to any blind man, but to one who had been blind since birth.

Jesus and his disciples came across this man, probably sitting beside the road begging – his only way to make a living. The disciples were curious. They had been taught that bad things happened only as a result of sin. So they wondered could Jesus tell them who had sinned: this young man before he was born or his parents? Jesus explained that what was important was that God would use this man's blindness for good.

Consider the trauma this family had endured. Celebrating the birth of a child, then discovering that the baby couldn't see. And then trying to work out who had committed the sin that caused this. Imagine the comments people would have made! But this story ends in "light" for Jesus made a paste (out of mud and saliva – an old medication) and smeared it on this chap's eyes, telling him to go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam. It sounds so simple

when John writes it down, but the blind man must have had to get a friend to take him and help him. Wonderfully he took the trouble, trusting in Jesus, and “came back able to see”. Wow! It sounds like a wonderful start to a new life – well, it was and it wasn’t.

First, the healing caused a commotion in the community, with everyone arguing about whether this was actually the blind beggar. He must have got tired of saying “I am the man”!

Then he had problems with the Jewish leaders to whom he had to report his change of health. They cross-questioned him over and over again - especially when they heard this had happened on the Sabbath or holy day. Instead of celebrating life; they celebrated law – which God doesn’t do. When Jesus’ name cropped up, they would have been furious. Eventually the healed man got irritated and the leaders threw him out of the worship community – thinking that this would prove to him how powerful and holy God was. His parents were too afraid to enter to defend him, merely confirming that he was their son.

But Jesus went to him and showed him that he still had a friend. Jesus explained that he had been given more than eye-sight, he had also been given a chance to see the world from God’s perspective. This would change his life more than being able to see would do! After all, the world wasn’t proving to be a very nice place and – what is more - one day the man’s eyes would stop functioning and he would die. But if he realised that he could walk in God’s light as God’s friend, he would have peace and security even in bad times and he would have the joy of knowing he was going to God one day. The light Jesus was offering wasn’t just a medical cure, great though that was. It was a great reminder (just like the temple fires) of God’s love and care.

So the people who heard Jesus say ‘I am the Light of the world’ would have got the two strong messages he was passing on. First, they would have realised that once again he was claiming to be like God. (They hadn’t yet realised he was God!) Second, they would have realised he was telling them that he could make a huge difference in their dark lives.

And because he loves us so much, Jesus wants to ‘light up’ our lives too with these messages. There are often things which make us feel a bit sad or even a bit scared. Well Jesus wants us to know that, if we trust him and allow him to be part of our lives, he will make a huge difference for us too. He will sweep out the darkness of selfishness and fill me with his light instead. The amazing thing is that then we will become mini-lights guiding others to Jesus. Now that is great news!

