



# Week 5: Jesus the Lord, Enlightening the World

## Scripture References

At his presentation in the Temple Jesus was acclaimed as, 'A light to enlighten the nations' (Luke 2.32). He called himself, 'The Light of the world' (John 8.12), a light St. John assures us no darkness can ever quench (John 1.5). In his resurrection Jesus scattered all darkness (Psalm 139.11-12) and offers us the light of eternal life.

## From the Book of Common Prayer

### Nunc Dimittis (Canticle of Simeon)

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace :  
according to thy word.  
For mine eyes have seen :  
thy salvation;  
Which thou hast prepared :  
before the face of all people;  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles :  
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.  
Glory be...

### Third Collect at Evensong

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by  
thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of  
this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour Jesus  
Christ.  
Amen.

## Comment on BCP Prayers

The Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2.28-32), one of the most beautiful NT canticles, looks back to Jesus' origins (as the glory of his own people, Israel) and forward to the salvation he will accomplish in his death and resurrection: the overflowing of God's grace beyond Israel (though without abandoning his people!) to all the nations of the earth. The much-loved Third Collect of Evensong asks for what we most need as we fall asleep at night: the light and protection of God through his Son, Jesus Christ. **But it also speaks to the many other kinds of darkness (fear, anxiety, despair, etc.) that risk enveloping the world and us.**

## Reflection, by Revd. Thomas Cotterill

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There is something almost disconcerting when on a bright Sunday afternoon, you are at Choral Evensong in our cathedral at 3pm and you hear the officiant pray the Third Collect, beseeching God to 'lighten our darkness'. It is thanks to Thomas Cranmer, author and compiler of the first versions of The Book of Common Prayer (those published in 1549 and 1552) and the inspiration behind the subsequent editions, that this collect and the Nunc Dimittis, which also speaks of light, are recited daily at Evensong.

Originally, and to this day in some forms of the Daily Office, the Canticle of Simeon is prayed in the last office of the day, Compline, at a time when the light has been or is being displaced by literal darkness. Indeed, this Collect is the old concluding prayer of Compline that Cranmer incorporated into Evensong. Whatever the level of light outside as you pray the words of Simeon, the reality of Christ as the 'Light of the World' (John 8.12) is recalled.

The theme of light overcoming darkness has long resonated with human experience. Countless religions have festivals of light – we need only think of Diwali for Hindus and the equivalent celebrations among the Sikhs. But in Christianity, this theme is more than a cosmic one. It is centred on a living person, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Church's liturgical year speaks of the light of Christ, making real and present in our own day the mysteries of Jesus' life. Take for example Candlemas, the festival of the Presentation of the Lord. At this feast, we recall those words uttered by Simeon that are recited at Evensong each day. Luke tells us that Simeon "came into the temple" and it was there that he encountered Christ with his mother and St Joseph.

It should come as no surprise, then, that at the end of his Gospel, Luke describes how after the Ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem and "were continually in the temple blessing God" (24:53).

We today are also afforded the privilege of encountering Christ in the temples built to God's glory that are our cathedrals and churches. Moreover, Luke tells us that Simeon praised God with the song we know as the Nunc dimittis whilst holding Christ in his arms. Again, it is in those buildings set apart for the worship of God that we too can take hold of Christ, most especially when we receive Holy Communion and not only taste and see how good God is, but touch this divine goodness given to us. The sacramental life of the Church, then, affords us the same opportunity as that given to Simeon of encountering God's glory and beholding Jesus, the Light of the World.

The celebration of the light of God in Christ culminates each year with Easter, the feast of feasts, which begins on Easter Eve in many churches with the most evocative service of the year, the Easter Vigil. As the Paschal Candle, symbol of the risen Lord, is processed into a completely dark church, 'the Light of Christ' is proclaimed three times.

For those of us who have been blessed to serve as the deacon at this liturgy, the acclamation of 'the Light of Christ' is a real joy. Here at this moment the victory of God in Christ over all the forces of darkness that beset our world is audibly and visibly declared.

That is why it is so meaningful to have this light, the light of Easter, visibly present when a new Christian is received into the Church through baptism and confirmation, and when a Christian is commended to God at the end of their life at their funeral. Between our first day as a Christian and our last, the light of Christ is present, even when it seems to be just a flicker.

There is a good reason, I think, why the Church Fathers spoke of Easter as 'the Great Sunday'. Each Sunday is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the weekly celebration of the Resurrection, and so since the earliest days Christians have gathered Sunday by Sunday to receive afresh the light of Christ as the Scriptures are read and the bread is broken. Even in the depths of this season of Lent when we are encouraged to fast and seek forgiveness for our failures to love as we are loved, this celebration continues. Hence also on Sundays in Lent we are able to enjoy the bounty of creation, even as we practise moderation.

As it was for Simeon in the temple, so we in our day receive Christ the Light of the World in the company of others. For many Christians, the love and prayers of those who were with Christ in the temple that day, Simeon and Anna, the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Joseph, are a source of deep joy.

After all, it was Mary who made possible the saving work of God in Christ through her 'yes' to God at the Annunciation and on every day of her life after that point. Shown most awfully at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday, this faithfulness came at great cost. It was the same Simeon who acclaimed the light of Christ who also told Mary that a sword would pierce her own soul too (Luke 2.35).

For many Christians today, faithfulness to Christ comes at great cost. Even in our land, which lauds itself for being a free and tolerant place, being a Christian in the public square can bring mockery or hostility. In times of difficulty, the presence of other servants of God, whether on earth or in heaven, can be a source of great comfort and consolation. When we ask Mary or other Saints to pray for us and with us, we celebrate and demonstrate the unbroken bond of love which unites all God's servants not just across space but through time as well.

The victory of life over death is the proclamation at the heart of our faith. Though in this season of Lent we deny ourselves the opportunity to acclaim this victory with the word beginning with 'A', we are nonetheless always Easter people, people who show in word and deed that God's light in Christ is greater than any darkness (John 1.5).

### Reflection on this week's image

The empty tomb shines with the light of Christ's resurrection: how can I in my turn be a light-bearing witness to the transforming power of God's love for the world?

### Questions for Discussion

- Simeon spoke of the universality of Christ's salvation. How does your church community reflect this universality? How could it more fully reflect it?
- Simeon and Anna encountered Christ in the temple. How does your church building reflect the beauty of holiness?
- Is the Eucharist at the centre of your life of faith? How does your church community foster a love for Christ who is given to us in the Eucharist?
- Simeon spoke of Mary's soul being pierced. How do you experience Mary's maternal love for you as a disciple of her Son?

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Next Year, 2025, will be the Year of Faith and  
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