

“Let your light shine before others, so that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”

Towards the end of my theological training, I was asked to complete a self-assessment form. This self-evaluation was partly assessed according to the “Kingdom Values” of the college, (based on the Beatitudes, which incidentally come just before today’s Gospel reading). Part of this form involved answering the question: “How are you growing in humility?” It felt like a trick question. Because it’s very hard to answer this positively without sounding a bit like Donald Trump: “I’m incredibly humble” probably wasn’t the answer they were looking for...

Hearing today’s Gospel, we might feel as if we’re placed in a similar situation. “Don’t put your light under a bushel, let your light shine before others.” Here we are seemingly called to the bold display of godliness. As the passage finishes, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” This seems to present a terrifying call to holiness that very few of us we feel capable of.

But what does it mean to let our light shine? Does it mean publicly sharing and boasting about our good deeds? Should the church invest in an increased social media presence, so people *really* know how special we are?

I’ve told this story before, so forgive me, but I hope it highlights the perils of such thinking. The day after my ordination, wearing my clerical collar for the first-time and feeling very “on display,” I was sat having coffee with a friend, when a Big Issue Seller came over to our table. Thankfully, I had change so was

able to buy one, and signal my virtue to those around me. But before I could become too smug with myself, another Big Issue seller came over- and just as I began to confidently gesture to the safety of my freshly bought copy, I noticed he was carrying next month's edition!! You can imagine the scene developing, with every street seller in London soon gathering around the coffee table, as I desperately sought to display my moral piety...

This is *not*, I think, what Jesus meant by letting our light shine— an imagined idea of pristine ethical performance.

Certainly, the church is called to holiness. We are called to a distinctive living. One of the Greek words used for the church throughout the New Testament is *ek-klesia*, meaning those who are *called out*. It denotes that the church is a distinctive gathering or assembly of people within the public sphere, those called to live a *new* life in Christ that is publicly visible.

But our distinctiveness as the church does not depend upon the goodness of our lives alone, but the life of Christ in us.

As St Paul's letter to the church in Corinth expresses, it is often in our *weakness* that we proclaim the power of God. The mystery of God is revealed not in wise words, or wonderful deeds of righteousness, but rather in our fundamental trust in Jesus Christ and him crucified.

For at the cross, we are faced with our inability to adhere to such high demands of the Law— the merciless burden of righteousness demanded by the god of the Pharisees and scribes.

But in Christ crucified, we also see God's insistence that our brokenness and failure is not the final word. For Christ is the light which the darkness cannot

overcome, so that through the cross comes resurrection, the promise that even our darkness can be redeemed for God's glory. Indeed, the holiest people I've met are those who seem to be most aware of their own brokenness, and therefore most open to receiving God's grace into their lives.

Writing on the wisdom of the desert Fathers, Rowan Williams reflects on this theme in the life of Macarius...

This beautifully illustrates that knowing God's love and mercy, we are free to be non-defensive in the acknowledgement of our weaknesses and failures before God. And in doing so, entrusting these to the merciful redemption of God, we allow his grace to shine through our lives, and so make space for others to let go, and let Christ in.

This is not, however, the faux-humility of the self-assessment form, where we declare our utter unworthiness, and insist we are of no real value— salt to be thrown out and trampled upon. In Christ's death on the cross, we see that God considers us to be of the highest value, never beyond redemption! Neither is this a call to relativity— "God's forgiven me; therefore it doesn't matter how I live my life!" No, Jesus really does call us, his church, to be the light of the world, so we better let his light shine in and through our lives!

But to do that, we must first acknowledge all the ways that we block out this light, or hide it under a bushel. This means letting Christ shine a light in all those darkened and broken parts of our lives, in order for them to be transformed and transfigured. This is the kind of honest, non-defensive, life that we are called to if our lives are to proclaim, not our own wisdom and holiness, but Christ and him crucified.

In doing so, we discover that *even* the broken parts of our lives may reflect and refract his light. So that like a kaleidoscopic stain glass window, people may see Christ's life shining in and through our own, to the glory of our Father in heaven.

Amen.