

## Belys: Shed light!

*“Nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.” (Luke 8.17)*

Light is the quality and reality of God’s kingdom. St Luke’s Gospel carries the promise that although temporarily hidden, the kingdom will become manifest. Christ’s saving death and resurrection will become the light which overcomes the darkness of sin and death.

So whatever is perpetrated in darkness will become exposed to the light. God’s people are called to become bearers of this light, shedding light on all that exploits and destroys the dignity of vulnerable people, particularly the scourge of modern slavery around the world. It’s shocking that there are an estimated 40 million victims of modern slavery in the world today. Of these, more than 70% are women.

Every story is a life, and of someone’s daughter or son. **Hana** escaped the conflict in her own country Syria, but was terrified being trafficked through Calais in France to the UK in the back of a lorry. She was highly vulnerable with escalating debt and no right to reside or work and was sent to work in a food factory where her wages were taken from her. She became completely trapped and was assaulted when she sought a way out. Thankfully light was shed when her employer became aware of her injuries and called the police. She was rescued and went on to be given proper employment.

Extreme vulnerability makes women and children and migrants particularly at risk from slavery and exploitation. So **Norwegian efforts** are being focussed on integrating women’s rights and gender equality into development policy; while also being vigilant for the exploitation of boys and men in the construction, fisheries, and agricultural sectors. Immediate action is being prioritised towards the inclusion of vulnerable groups during post-COVID-19 recovery, and particularly to getting children back into schools, especially girls aged 11-18 who are most at risk of dropping out permanently. In the longer term, schooling for children and young people in crisis and conflict situations will be prioritised to reduce their vulnerability to becoming victims of modern slavery. Norway is also working with its development partner countries in addressing human trafficking, forced labour, child labour and forced marriages. There are so many challenges on which light needs to be shed and closing the knowledge gap has an essential part to play.

**The churches’ Global Week** focus also plays its important part in shedding light. Focussed between 13th and 20th November, this united ecumenical action seeks to shed light both on the reality of modern slavery and the reality of God’s promise of light and life which overcomes the order of sin and death. The churches are uniquely placed to shed light on the hope found in God’s word in Holy Scripture and for this transforming word to be active through our lives and communities.

Global Week concludes with the Sunday on which many churches celebrate Christ the King,

a theme which lends itself to Christ's pre-eminence over all earthly powers and drivers of exploitation. Global Week this year begins on Sunday 13th November when the Revised Common Lectionary offers the following readings: **Malachi 4.1-2a; Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13 and Luke 21.5-19** through which the light of God's word may be shed.

The Prophet **Malachi** looks forward to the day "when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble", burned up by the day which is coming. Neither root or branch will be left: all that had previously been hidden will be uncovered and consumed. However, for those who revere God, "the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." Some scholars have suggested the Hebrew Scripture draws creatively here from Mesopotamian tradition where the king not only acted as judge but also represented the divine justice attributed to the sun god. With the morning sunrise, so arose divine righteousness, leading the people along right paths. Righteous meant healthy, and to live according to the rhythm of the sun's light. So judging takes on the positive sense of raising up, giving life and healing. The king himself depends on the cosmic order, and so protects the weak from the strong, the land from exploitation. Righteousness equates to the active creation of justice.

In a similar way, the prophet Malachi offers assurance that God's justice will come, as the sun of righteousness rises. God's judgment will not simply evaluate good and evil but will create justice and healing by overcoming injustice and oppression of the poor and needy. Jürgen Moltmann contends that Christian theology has not always taken due account of this creative aspect of God's judgement which is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. He points to the conviction in the psalms that "God's supreme justice will 'create' justice for the victims of wickedness, will raise them up out of the dust, will heal their wounded lives, and put to rights the lives which have been destroyed." With such an understanding, the victims wait for God's creative justice, "based on the suffering of the sufferers," which will bring them liberty, healing and new life, all dearly sought by the victims of modern slavery.

**Psalm 98** also sheds light on the theme of judgment, highlighting God's victory and "vindication in the sight of the nations". The psalm praises God who "has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel". God's victory is first seen in rescuing God's covenant people. But the psalm continues that the whole earth should sing praises to God, and particularly the whole of creation - that the sea should roar, that the floods clap, that the hills sing for joy - at the Lord's coming to judge the earth. For God "will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity". God's creative justice is for all peoples and for the world itself.

**2 Thessalonians** is concerned for the Christian community both to have a proper expectation of the Lord's coming at the end times and to live and work faithfully according to apostolic example in the extended interim. At first glance verses 6-13 appear as an afterthought. But when examined in a closer light, these verses offer substantive teaching on the nature of work in the light of the Gospel. The audience are warned to "keep away from believers who are living in idleness" since this was not the apostolic example given to

them. “We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.” Here are shown a concern for paying a fair wage for someone’s bread, and a concern not to live off or exploit the work of others. A complaint is made regarding some living in idleness, as busybodies not doing any work. It is not far to connect this with the abuse and manipulation of others so commonly found in modern slavery, from busybodies who disregard the impact on those exploited. It further situates the concern over exploitation within the need to enable the participation of all in the community’s toil and labour.

The **UN Sustainable Development Goals** likewise situate the goal of eradicating modern slavery (8.7) within the framework of Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth. Goal 8 calls on countries to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. It recognises the dignity of participation in work as well as the necessity to ensure such work is “decent”. Unfortunately, many earn insufficient to lift themselves out of poverty, and the division of labour is often unjust. Target 8.7 sets the bar: “Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.” We find echoes here of the concern of the early church to live justly amid its realisation that the Lord’s coming may still be long awaited. Decent work is for the participation of the whole community and due reward is to be given to enable sustainable living.

In **Luke 21.5-19**, Jesus points to the ephemeral nature of the Jerusalem temple in its beauty and glory. Although “adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God”, the day would come “when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” We discover that light may be shed not by the apparent genius of craftsmanship but by the care and loyalty towards one another amid conflict and persecution. Jesus warns of the abuses to follow, “You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends.” One of the human tragedies of modern slavery is the many victims introduced and sometimes even exploited by members of their own families, out of desperation or betrayal. How disturbing the plight of women and children placed into situations of modern slavery by those who had been entrusted with their care.

St Luke’s Gospel warns that the oppressive treatment which Jesus himself suffered will now be inflicted on his followers. But although Jesus was betrayed and rejected, he was also to be vindicated. So he becomes a source of strength and encouragement, as later will his followers like Stephen and Paul, whose persecution will strengthen the church. Christ’s victory offers encouragement amid persecution. “You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Christ’s own vindication sheds healing light on those suffering exploitation and persecution. The role of Christ’s followers is themselves to remain faithful amid testing so also to be able to shed light on the suffering of others.

This suffering will be the starting point for **God's creative justice**. As light is shed, it will also be the starting point for creative action to overcome and eradicate modern slavery. So light plays a key role in God's kingdom becoming reality. It may be hidden for now, but as St Luke's Gospel promises, God's kingdom will become manifest. Our invitation is to participate as faithful disciples in shedding light, so that Christ's light may be experienced in its fullness, in his saving death and resurrection which has overcome the darkness of sin and death.

***A hymn for praise and reflection***

*Thou, whose almighty word  
chaos and darkness heard,  
and took their flight;  
hear us, we humbly pray,  
and, where the Gospel day  
sheds not its glorious ray,  
let there be light!*

*Thou who didst come to bring  
on thy redeeming wing  
healing and sight,  
heal to the sick in mind,  
sight to the in-ly blind,  
now to all humankind,  
let there be light!*

*Spirit of truth and love,  
life-giving holy Dove,  
speed forth thy flight!  
Move on the waters' face bearing the gifts of  
grace,  
and, in earth's darkest place,  
let there be light!*

*Holy and blessèd Three,  
glorious Trinity,  
Wisdom, Love, Might;  
boundless as ocean's tide,  
rolling in fullest pride,  
through the world far and wide,  
let there be light!*

*John Marriott (1780-1825)*

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Scriptural readings are taken from the New Revised Standard Version

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