

A 4-part Advent course helping us to reflect, at the darkest time of the year, on our calling to be Lights for Christ

Light in the Darkness

Part 1

DISTANCE



**THE DIOCESE
OF SHEFFIELD**
Renewed | Released | Rejuvenated

Lights for Christ

Course Introduction

Welcome to Light in the Darkness

This Advent, the night sky will offer something special. If you look to the southwestern horizon on a clear evening, soon after sunset, you should see two bright lights: the planets Jupiter and Saturn. Each evening, they will move slightly closer. Just before Christmas, Jupiter will pass in front of Saturn: what astronomers call a 'Great Conjunction'. On the longest, darkest night of the year, the two will seem to merge into a single light that shines with truly exceptional brightness.

This course aims to help us reflect, at the darkest time of the year, on our calling to be Lights for Christ. We'll consider what that means and looks like; how that light may shine more brightly at the close of this year.

The course is designed for the four weeks of the Advent season. It can be used individually or in groups. Feel free to use it flexibly: for example, if Advent is very busy for you, you might decide to complete the second half of the course after Christmas. Traditional Advent themes are present, but not the major focus of this course. Its main aim is to help us reflect on our experience during an extraordinary year which is now drawing towards its close. In doing so, we also look forward as we enter a new season and new year. The four parts are based around four words which have been central to many people's experience during all the upheavals of 2020.

DISTANCE • SAFE • TRUST • NORMAL

Light in the Darkness

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis of 2020 has forced us to become aware of distance. We've each had to create physical distance between ourself and most other people, while working out how to keep up vital social contact: by phone, online, chatting over the garden fence, etc. Sometimes at work or in the shops we've felt a bit like individual planets, circling around each other, trying to avoid collisions!

Often, it's felt really hard to resist that basic human 'gravitational pull' towards physical contact: we miss the emotional nourishment of those handshakes and hugs. Loving our neighbour now involves keeping this distance from them. We feel bewildered and a kind of grief, lamenting the loss of human contact which we perhaps used to take for granted.

Receive the Light

What is God saying to us through Scripture?

Imagine the scene. As darkness falls, it's time to leave the open road and find somewhere to spend the night. No safe lodging to be found here; the only option is a night spent under the stars. Home feels far behind – although memories linger of its warmth, familiarity and security, its tension and simmering anger. The road ahead leads to unknown, distant relatives: will they turn out to be welcoming, or not? A lot for a lone traveller to mull over in the evening hours...



Read Genesis 28:10-22

One feature of the book of Genesis is dysfunctional families. More specifically, one family over successive generations, disrupted by favouritism and jealousy. Home-loving Jacob, scheming with his mother, has so angered and alienated his brother Esau that he needs to run for his life; so he is sent away. In this passage we meet him at his most isolated and vulnerable, alone in an unknown place, at a distance from all those he knows and should be closest to. He shows no interest in reaching out to God; yet here, at this lowest point, God meets him and speaks directly to him. Through the mysterious dream, Jacob is challenged to see a new reality, to look beyond what he normally sees. He discovers that Yhwh, the God of his grandfather Abraham, is not limited to one place or one generation; Yhwh can choose to draw close and be encountered in a totally unfamiliar setting (verse 16). This God can become his God, too.



What do you notice in the words that God speaks to Jacob? Think particularly about how these words speak to his sense of isolation and vulnerability. You might like to choose a particular phrase and reflect on what it says.



What do you make of Jacob's responses to his dream? Most read it as grateful commitment to God, although some wonder if it's a more characteristic cautious bargaining. Do you think this experience of encountering Yhwh changes him?



Jacob is the first person in the Bible to hear God promise 'I am with you' (verse 15). Notice how that phrase is repeated later to others (Exodus 3:12; Joshua 1:5; Judges 6:16; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23 and 28:20). Why is this simple promise so powerful and important?



Does anything in this story 'ring bells' and connect with your experiences – of family life, of distance, or of encountering God? What might God be saying to you through Jacob's story?

Walk in the Light

What shall we do differently, to live more wisely?

Here are some ideas you could consider.



Scripture encourages us to express ourselves in times of grief or isolation, through praying the Psalms of lament or simply in wordless groaning (Romans 8:22-23).

How do you feel about praying this way? Is it something you might explore more?



Whatever the physical distance, we can usually still connect – with God and with each other – through words. Where are you finding and sharing wise words at present? Search out some more of the messages, books, podcasts, websites etc that bring you encouragement and connection. Is it time to pick up the phone for a conversation that will nourish you?



Families fall out with each other (not least at this time of year, which is sometimes stressful). Is there anyone you need to contact, to see if something can be resolved?

Reflect the Light

How shall we share God's light in the world's darkness?

Here are some suggestions. They might prompt you to think of other, better ideas – if so, go for it!



Do you know people in your community who have left family in another country and come to live here? If so, how do you think that distance may affect them? Can you do a bit more to become a good neighbour and good friend to them?



Can you think of someone you know from this country who is living overseas. If so, could you send them a card or picture or message, to make contact and encourage them?



Lockdown helped some of us become more aware of our immediate local environment. Is there a volunteer group you could join – or start – to help make part of your local area more beautiful and healthy? It might also be a good way to get alongside new friends.

The stars that radiate light, even the planets that reflect our sun's light – all are separated from us by colossal distances. Yet still the light from them reaches us – and can inspire awe, delight and hope in those who look up and notice it.

Next Session

PART 2: SAFE

A 4-part Advent course helping us to reflect, at the darkest time of the year, on our calling to be Lights for Christ

Light in the Darkness

Part 2

SAFE



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Light in the Darkness

Introduction

'Stay safe' has been another recurring phrase during the Covid-19 crisis: heard in conversations, used in signing off emails from friends and colleagues, urged on us by government ministers and health officials. Meanwhile our news media bring us images of people fleeing dangerous places, risking their lives in flimsy boats to reach countries such as ours, where they hope to be safe.

We're all prone to anxiety about safety; it's part of our self-preservation instinct, to help us avoid danger. Unusual lights in night sky, such as comets, have prompted anxiety down the centuries – and still do. Expectation about the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn this December is producing some ingenious, elaborate speculation online that it will herald the end of the age and the arrival of the Antichrist! Handling our anxieties and our natural desire to stay safe remains as much a challenge today as ever. Perhaps this is especially so in Western cultures, where protecting ourselves from any threat or harm sometimes seems to have become an obsession.

Receive the Light





What is God saying to us through Scripture?

How safe can we be? How safe do we really want to be? These have always been challenging questions



Read Acts 11:19–30




These early Christians find themselves living in unstable and dangerous times. Stephen, one of the Jerusalem church's most inspiring leaders, has been killed by an angry mob; in the chapter following this one, we hear of the execution of James (Acts 7 and 12:1-2). The warning of an imminent famine presents a new threat; those who lack food, even if they survive, will become weaker and vulnerable to disease. The world feels unsteady and unsafe. Some people may be wondering 'Why does God allow such suffering? Why this injustice? Why are God's faithful ones allowed to die before their time?' Yet through all this turmoil, God cares for and nourishes the churches; and the good news of Jesus keeps spreading, changing lives, bringing healing and hope. The Christians reach out in sacrificial ways – remarkably, even to those elsewhere who are not their own neighbours or kin.

-  What do you notice in this passage that may both challenge and encourage you?
 -  Jewish Christians are seeing large numbers of Greek-speaking people becoming believers. Then Barnabas arrives, sent from Jerusalem; he goes and finds Saul, bringing him into the life of the church. Might these various changes raise anxieties for some, making them feel 'unsafe'?
 -  Much of what we read here is plural: Jesus' followers travel, meet, make decisions, step out in faith, etc., together, not just on their own. What difference does my connection with my wider Christian family make when confronting life's challenges?
 -  When does wisdom require acting with caution, to avoid dangerous recklessness? When does faith call for taking greater risks, which may feel distinctly unsafe? Think about how you experience these tensions in your life as a Light for Christ.
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Walk in the Light

What shall we do differently, to live more wisely?

Here are some ideas you could consider.

-  One feature of the COVID-19 crisis in its early months was public displays of gratitude – particularly towards health workers and other key workers. What can you do to keep cultivating that positive attitude of gratitude for so much that we easily take for granted?
 -  None of us can guarantee our good health; none of us knows when we will die. How do these simple facts affect the way you will live this week?
 -  We've had to learn to wear masks in many public places: not to keep ourselves safe, but to keep others around us safe from the virus which we might be accidentally spreading. How can we develop a wider concern in life to protect other people, rather than simply ourselves?
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Reflect the Light

How shall we share God's light in the world's darkness?



Think of someone you know who may be feeling anxious and unsafe at present, for whatever reason. Is there a simple, practical way you can reach out to that person?



This Advent season will provide special events focused on the beliefs we treasure, some perhaps taking place in our church buildings, others online. Who might you invite join you and share in a particular event? If inviting them feels 'unsafe' to you, pray into why you feel that way.



Climate change is bringing greater extremes of drought and flooding across the world. Can you give some more support to people who work to build greater resilience and security in vulnerable communities?

When Lucy first hears about Aslan, she nervously guesses that coming close to the great lion isn't necessarily safe.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

(CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, chapter 8).

Next Session

PART 3: TRUST

A 4-part Advent course helping us to reflect, at the darkest time of the year, on our calling to be Lights for Christ

Light in the Darkness

Part 3

TRUST



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Light in the Darkness

Introduction

Another big issue in 2020 – less obvious, but widespread – has been about trust. Surveying the vast galaxy of the internet, we wonder where to find trustworthy information. Do we trust our politicians and their advisors as they handle the challenges of the pandemic and Brexit? Shall we rely on computers and their clever algorithms to influence our life chances, not least young people's exam grades? What about trusting our neighbours: if we've been getting to know them better during lockdown, are we now supposed to inform on each other if too many guests come to visit? The church also faces an ongoing challenge, with recent horrific reports about child abuse undermining trust in clergy.

Yet we find that we cannot live without trust. Some people choose to look to the stars and planets, putting their trust in horoscopes to help them make sense of their lives. Christian understanding and faith teaches a very different way of navigating life and learning where to place our trust.

Receive the Light

What is God saying to us through Scripture?



Read 2 Tim 1:8-2:2

A network of trusting relationships runs through this passage: see how many you can spot! We hear the voice of Paul, writing from prison to a younger leader with whom he has developed a strong working relationship (see 1:2; also Romans 16:21). Paul trusts Timothy to continue leading the church in Ephesus and to pass on the good news of Jesus to other faithful people (2 Timothy 2:2). As a trusted mentor, Paul feels he can advise Timothy about particular characters, being honest about those who have let him down and commending the one who has proved to be truly trustworthy (1:15-18). Here is a reliable example for Timothy to model himself on.

Paul also sees the importance of both himself and Timothy being trustworthy, growing in faith and love, knowing that truth telling and sharing the good news are part of a holy calling (1:9, 13). Underlying all this is the faith that both of them have in God – arising from God's faith in them! Paul senses that God has given grace and entrusted the good news of that grace to them, as a wonderful treasure; now God trusts them to share that treasure with others, helped by the Holy Spirit who lives in them (1:11-14).



Think about being trusted by God. God entrusts to each of us the good news of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And God trusts us to share this grace with others. How does it make you feel, knowing that God believes in you and trusts you in this way? How do we respond?



Now think about being trustworthy. We cannot live without relationships; in these, we need to be able to rely on each other. What can we learn from the network of relationships in this passage about how we become more and more trustworthy?



For relationships to work, we also need to be people who are able to place our trust in others. This involves growing our generosity of spirit along with shrewd judgement. What pointers does Paul give us in this?



Undergirding all is a constantly growing trust in God. As you glimpse Paul and Timothy's faith in Christ in these verses, is there something here that helps nourish your own faith?

Walk in the Light

What shall we do differently, to live more wisely?



Think of someone you know whom you trust. What is it about them that prompts you to trust them? Give thanks for that person and pray about how you can keep developing those same qualities which you see in them.



At the very moment when I was inside, writing these words – outside in the street, my bike was stolen! This tickled my sense of irony, but... If becoming hard-bitten and cynical is a luxury we cannot afford, how shall we resist the temptation to succumb to it when people let us down?



Our anxieties can undermine our trust in others; perhaps this is a factor for Paul, with his concern for the church prompting him to exhort Timothy so strongly. Pray about any particular anxieties that weigh on you at present, particularly if they are affecting the way you relate to other people.

Reflect the Light

How shall we share God's light in the world's darkness?



Do you know someone who feels it's not safe to trust others? Finding you to be a reliable, trustworthy person can help them to heal. Don't underestimate the value of a quiet, routine consistency, as part of your witness to Christ and a means of blessing to others.



Talking about our faith with people who feel they have no faith can be a struggle. Might it help sometimes to talk instead about who we trust and how important that is for all of us?



If trust has been undermined in local or national politics, is it time for you to become more involved yourself? Is there an influencing or leadership role in a community group which you might fit?

'Trust arrives on foot, but leaves on horseback'

Old Dutch proverb

Next Session

PART 4: NORMAL

A 4-part Advent course helping us to reflect, at the darkest time of the year, on our calling to be Lights for Christ

Light in the Darkness

Part 4

NORMAL

Light in the Darkness

Introduction

‘When will we be able to get back to normal?’ That question has been asked for much of this year, as we’ve thought about the ongoing disruption to our home life, church life, work life, travel, recreation.... Yet much of that disruption continues; life still feels far from normal.

What does ‘normal’ actually look like? It depends who you are and where you stand. For some people, experiencing prejudice because of their skin colour is their ‘normal’ experience. For millions across the world today, an unsafe supply of drinking water is still ‘normal’. Millions more struggle to breathe because air quality is always so poor. Farmers face unpredictable weather – a pattern of instability which is now becoming a regular experience. Do we really want our life to ‘get back to normal’?

The special ‘Christmas star’ in our night sky this December will not be normal; it will be something exceptional, extraordinary. That might be a fitting symbol of the strange year we have just been through. Could it also give us a better aspiration for the new year that lies ahead? What kind of new and better ‘normal’ can we imagine, dream of – then strive for and help to fashion?

Receive the Light

What is God saying to us through Scripture?




Read Psalm 146


Imagine a life in which prayer and praise to God has the first word and the last word (verses 1, 10). A life in which a positive, daily relationship with God becomes the norm year by year, providing consistency and security in all the bewildering changes that may arise (verse 2).


Imagine a world in which we all acknowledge our human limitations, agreeing that even the powerful and influential are limited in their power, fallible and mortal, just like the rest of us – and yet still find we can have hope by trusting in someone far greater, whose help is reliable (verses 3-6). How would this perspective shape our normal life?


Imagine a society where truth is treasured and justice is enacted for those who have been denied it; where food is available for those who most need it, where the most vulnerable are supported, empowered, liberated, where goodness is valued and corruption firmly resisted (verses 6-9). The kind of society Jesus depicted when he read from the visions of Isaiah at the launch of his own ministry (Luke 4:16-21). What would our world look like if all this was normal practice?

Perhaps such dreams seem like a ridiculous fantasy? Martin Luther King was someone with a God-given dream of a different 'normal', in which black people mattered as much as white people. By seeing, living and sharing that vision, he inspired many, igniting imagination, firing passion, stirring people to action. To counter apathy and cynicism, we need dreams of a better 'normal', such as the one in this psalm, to nourish our imagination and energise our daily living.

 'The LORD' (Yhwh, the God of covenant love) is repeatedly mentioned in this psalm. Notice the many things mentioned that Yhwh does. Do one or two of these particularly delight and stir you? If so, pray about how you can live out those priorities and commitments more fully as part of your Christian calling.


 How does God actually do the various things described here? Do we just sit back and watch or wait for it to happen? Often God chooses to act through human beings; we become part of the answer to our own prayers. This captivating vision has an edge: it demands some action from us!


 God's way of using power is to strengthen those who lack power. Contrary to the popular saying, God helps those who cannot help themselves. How do we use whatever power we have – in our homes, churches, at work or in the wider community? Can you think of examples of yourself or others using power in the kind of way God does: seeking to empower other people?


 How does the coming of Jesus Christ – his first coming as a vulnerable infant and his second coming as a powerful judge – shape your understanding of what a God-shaped 'normal' might look like?

Walk in the Light

What shall we do differently, to live more wisely?

 The first person, the speaker of this psalm address, is his or her self. A new 'normal' begins with me: my familiar attitudes and my regular, consistent actions. Which of your regular attitudes and actions do you want to treasure and grow? Are there any you want to change?

 The psalm shows a God of grace in action. For God to use us in the ways shown in this psalm involves us being generous: with our time, money, skills. Do you need to adjust your priorities in the year ahead, to make this more possible?

 Look for a new way to honour 'the maker of heaven and earth' through caring for creation as part of your normal routine. It might be a simple small step, or a bigger change. If you're needing ideas, try these websites to get you thinking.

- <https://arocha.org.uk>
- <https://greenchristian.org.uk/radical-presence>

Reflect the Light

How shall we share God's light in the world's darkness?



Try to find out more about somebody else's 'normal'. What is daily life like for refugees and asylum seekers, or for the many people who have recently lost their jobs, or for younger people in your area? Look for opportunities to listen and understand more deeply. See whether that changes your thinking and leads you to action. How will God's grace and justice become more real for them?



There are probably conversations going on in your community about what the post-Covid world needs to look like. Can you find ways to get involved and bring a constructive Christian voice into those discussions? If you're already doing that, what responses are you experiencing?



Think about people in positions of power, perhaps those with responsibilities in church or the local community (this might include yourself). How can you encourage them to be honest about their limitations and also to use their power to empower others more fully?

“What we need is an entirely new narrative in which care for the vulnerable is in the centre.”

Angela's Story, from *Renew Normal: The People's Commission on Life After Covid-19* (<https://renewnormal.co.uk>)

After Glow

A final thought and prayer



Read Genesis 15:1, 5-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' 5 He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

When Abram looked up at the night sky, did he ever see a conjunction of the great planets? Quite possibly – their movements were as regular then as they are today. God used those familiar lights in the night sky to help build his hope for the future; he was learning to trust in God's promises, despite the obvious obstacles which sometimes seemed overwhelming and impossible to overcome

God promised blessing to Abraham's family and through them to all the peoples of the earth. As Christians, we see this focused and amplified above all in the coming of Jesus Christ, 'God with us'. We believe and celebrate that Christ is still the light that shines in the darkness, which the darkness has not grasped (understood/overcome). Here we find hope for today and tomorrow.

A prayer

Our gracious God,

thank you for bringing us to the end of this year.

Thank you for what we have learned and how we have grown.

Thank you for those we have loved and lost;

thank you for those we have encountered and valued

and for those with whom we have laughed, cried and persevered.

In the days that lie ahead,

please give us renewed grace and wisdom

in handling distance and being 'safe',

in building trust and finding a better 'normal';

so that in and through us, Christ will be seen,

the light that shines in the darkness.

Amen.

This course was written by Bill Goodman. Feedback is always welcome:

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