

Dear sisters and brothers,

we have had a long, fairly warm and friendly autumn this year... no need to complain, I guess. But slowly but surely we can feel the winter creeping up on us with its cold air, the bad weather and the darkness that sets in in the late afternoon already. And at the same time we can discover that the city is filled with light everywhere we go. People have started to hang lightchains in their trees and their windows, buildings in center city are illuminated brightly and when you enter a café or restaurant you find many more candles decorating the tables than you did in the summertime. Obviously there is a great need for many of us, to fight the darkness and cold of this season with light and a warm, cosy atmosphere. And the closer we move to advent and Christmas the more light we will see around us.

So where does this whole light idea come from? Is it connected to Christmas or is one of our deepest- rooted needs to collect other means of light when the sun leaves us in the lurch?

The image of light in times of darkness has a very long tradition. Let us follow it back to the time in which the Gospel of John was put together 2000 years ago.

John's Gospel is very special in the way that the writer put great effort into showing very many facets of the person Jesus, his living and his teaching. As we worked through the gospels during our faith and worship training, I found out that John actually offers us the most detailed answers to the question: Who is Jesus? He tells us about Jesus in miracles and encounters as we heard in the readings for today, but he also lets Jesus give his own testimony through so-called „I am sayings“ which we only find in the gospel of John. Seven of these sayings take on a key-role in John's gospel.

I am the bread of life.

I am the gate for the world.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

I am the true vine.

And: I am the light of the world.

We can find the whole passage to this last „I-am-saying“ in John 8, verse 12:

„I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.“

When I read through this passage for the first time, I tried to imagine what the image of light meant to the first listeners that Jesus addressed back then. What source of light could they have had? The sun for sure was the main source of light back then. Whenever it shone, crops and plants could grow, men and women could work and life in all its fullness could take place. But what happened when the sun went down?

Of course there were ways of creating light by making fires, lighting oil lamps or torches. But were fires, oil lamps and torches available all the time? To everybody? However long? I doubt it.

I rather have the image that artificial light was regarded as very precious and many people had to do without it for a long time. In other words „darkness“ was not only a metaphor but a daily threat to many people. And there was surely a great longing for a light that always shines. A light that never extinguishes and that is available to everybody, no matter whether he is rich or poor, young or old, shepherd or pharisee.

So, in the eyes of those first listeners, Jesus says: I am your light. I am there when fear arises. I am there to make your daily life easier. I am there whenever oil lamps and torches extinguish.

When I consulted a commentary, I found out that light was an important element in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast was celebrated to thank God for the harvest and for the blessings that people received in their lives, similar to our Harvest festival. Lamp stands in the Temple Court of the women were lit on the evening of the first festival day and the light expanded to every courtyard in Jerusalem. Another act of celebration at this festival was a dance in which torches were swung around. So light was the element for joy. And the light wasn't only for those joining the feast, but it was spread into all parts of the city.

If we bear that in mind, Jesus is saying: I am the light of the world that reaches every person. I shine into every corner of my kingdom and illuminate the darkest spots of your hearts and houses.

The importance of light is also shown in the Old Testament. Light is for example God's first creation. In the Exodus we can find the image of light in the stories of God guiding the people of Israel through the wilderness. At night he turns into a pillar of fire in order „to give them light“.

The saying: „I am the light“ in this context means: I am the light that guides and directs you. I make sure you don't fall and I don't extinguish until you've reached your destination.

So we can see, when Jesus says: „I am the light of the world“ he builds a bridge between an image of God in the Old Testament, his own role in the New Testament and the associations with light that we have today. It's an image that is timeless and leaves lots of room for interpretation.

What image do you connect to light?

Is it as precious to you as it was to the first believers during Jesus' lifetime?

When I thought about the image of light in my own life I was taken back to the times in which I was doing my student teaching. I might have mentioned that I lived in the village of Schrobenhausen about 100 kilometres away from Munich back then. Schrobenhausen is best known for its asparagus and second best for its fog. I swear, I never knew what real fog is like before I lived there. But I learned quickly and I can say today that those years were two years of ultimate darkness in my life. Not only because of the fog. In the mornings when I walked to school I could sometimes hardly find it because of the thick fog and every step that I took was surrounded by a feeling of insecurity and helplessness. Since I couldn't see anyone around

me, I felt as if I was alone in this world and even the lights of the cars seemed ever so far away.

I remember struggling along from one glimpse of light to the next in order not to get lost. Lampposts... the headlights of a car... a ray of light shining from a window... and traffic lights. Those were my pillars of fire on some days. And I can't tell you how often I stood in the dark and gazed into the windows of the houses wishing that I could be there, instead of outside... in the dark. And once I was at home I lit all the candles I could find hoping that their flames would lighten up my day and be a substitute for the sun I was missing so much. I wish that they could bring to me my home in Munich that seemed so warm and light compared to this place.

And in the midst of all this misery it was actually Peace Church that made me recognize Jesus as a constant source of light again. Christine and many of you functioned very well as bearers of the light of Jesus, giving me back my faith and my hope that I had lost somewhere on the journey. And after my first Sunday at Peace Church, which was a candle light service, I took a little candle home into the foggy darkness and sung: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine..." And it did. This little light guided me through dark times and lead me to the light of Peace Church.

In those two years I learned my lesson about darkness and light, not only figurative. And light has ever since been a symbol of love and care, of hope and friendliness, of direction and orientation to me. A symbol of order in the midst of chaos. Of energy and life. And of all the hope and joy I can only find in Jesus.

What about you?

Can you recall peaceful camp fires moments and candle light prayers? Do you have memories of reading under the blankets with a flashlight and driving through the mist with only your headlights to guide you?

I do hope that your lives are full of light.

But I am just as certain, that you have had your share of despair and your moments of darkness, too. Maybe long ago. Maybe just recently. And maybe just this morning.

If we only look at the first part of the sentence **„I am the light of the world“**, the saying is a mere statement or a testimony. Something you can either believe or deny.

It is the second part of the saying that speaks to us, encourages us and fills us with light, the moment we read it: **„Whoever follows me, will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.“**

It sounds so easy, doesn't it? Just turn your eyes upon Jesus, follow him and everything will be alright. What a promise. What a guideline. What a relief.

If you are capable of hoping, following and believing...

But what if not?

What if we are too weak to follow?

What if we are too lost to trust the light?

What if we have gotten used to the darkness?

What if the light doesn't come our way?
What if we just can't move?

Luckily, John added many stories and miracles to his gospel that show how Jesus dealt with people who couldn't follow on their own. Those stories give us strength and hope because they show that Jesus finds us, even if we are too weak to come to him.

One of those stories is the story of Jesus healing the man at the pool that we heard as a second reading.

Do you remember the lot of the man at the pool?
38 years of sickness and despair. 38 years of helplessness.
38 years of being numb and paralyzed.
38 years...that is longer than I have lived so far.
Would you agree that he has experienced 38 years of darkness?

Let us take this man from the pool and set him into our scene of light and darkness. What does Jesus do in order to attract him to the light?

First of all he finds him.
The he sees him...looks at him, doesn't turn his head in disgust.
He addresses him.
He listens to him.
Perhaps he touches him.
Jesus doesn't present himself as a ray of light that rushes by and is gone before you can even cry out: „Take me with you!“ Although no time frame is given in this miracle, we see that Jesus takes his time to see what the man's problem is. And the man has time to find faith in the stranger who can heal him and do what Jesus requires from him: to believe.
And in the end the miracle is perfect. The man can walk again, move again, dance and rejoice again. And why? Because Jesus searched for him in the darkness and brought as much light to his life as he needed in order to follow him.

The miracle also shows us that despite of the long period of darkness, the man has the resources for his healing within him. It is his decision to stand up and walk. And it his strength and his faith that makes him well.

So, however dark the world around us might seem... it is not dark enough for us to hide from Jesus.
However long the darkness around us has lasted... it is never too late for us to follow Jesus into the light.
And however paralyzed we feel... it only takes a spark of belief to walk the first step towards the light.

John and many other writers of his time put much effort into giving us answers to the question: "Who is Jesus?"
And all we hear about him fills us with comfort, heals us and gives us confidence.

But like the light in the Feast of Tabernacles, the light of Jesus should not remain at one place or in the heart and being of a single person, but rather spread.

So let us search for Jesus in our lives and let him lighten up our darkness. Let us light a torch from the light we experience and hand it on to one another... like the women, children and men did in the old days. Let us too, be a light to the world and let us pass on the light of Christ to everybody who is lost in the darkness. Let us search for them. Let us listen to them. See them in their wholeness and touch them with the light of love and care that we have.

Let us walk as children of the light.

For Jesus says: **„I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me, will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.“**

Amen.