I am sure that many here are old enough to remember the Light Programme on the radio, now called Radio 2? Well that is one of the themes of today, I mean light not radio. I think the radio programme was meant to be lightweight, rather than illuminating, but I may be doing it an injustice. For today’s theme is anything but lightweight, it is a matter of life and death. From our gospel reading we heard how Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum. Matthew, always being keen to show the Jews how Jesus was fulfilling the OT prophecies of the Messiah, interprets this move as a fulfilment of one of Isaiah’s prophecies: *The people that lived in darkness saw a great light; light has dawned on those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death.*

I also know that we have a few singers here, not of the Light Programme variety but singers of serious and illuminating works. But one that you may not have encountered is by one of my favourite composers, Edward Elgar, and sums up the critical importance of this theme in its very title: The Light of Life. For the light that Jesus brought into the world is certainly not lightweight, and it is not just illuminating. That light is Life with a capital L, the light of the world, the universe and everything. In one of the solos in Elgar’s work Jesus says: “I am the Light of the World. He that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of Life.”

Light is an inestimably important symbol of life. Important for everyone and everything, not just for Christians and not just for human beings. Light is indeed fundamental to life, the universe and everything. It was not until photons, the particles of light were able to escape from the big-bang, 379,000 years afterwards, that there was any hope of a universe coming into being at all. It was not until stars were formed later (100M years), generating light and heat, that there was enough energy density in the universe to allow the heavier elements like carbon, nitrogen and oxygen to form, of which organic life is made. It is only light falling upon the Earth, reacting with the chlorophyll in the leaves of plants to produce sugars and oxygen, which has allowed complex animals to form that use those plants as food. So we depend on light more than we know.

And probably more than Jesus knew as well, for he was talking more symbolically. He knew that he was a light to the world that would lead people to follow, to see their life in a new way and to transform the works of darkness and evil into thoughts and actions of love and truth. Jesus is talking about **real** life here. Not what we usually mean by real life, but the life that God intended us for. This is not just an everyday existence of working, eating, sleeping or shopping. It is a life that is in harmony with our spiritual needs, and so it is a truly satisfying life. Just as light was necessary to enable our physical existence, so the light that Jesus brings into the world is necessary for us to live that **real** life, rather than just existing.

We might ask; how can light achieve that transformation? One important way is through truth. Light reveals truth. We might think that we know about truth, but as with life, we only have a partial and restricted view. Through the light we shall know **the** truth. This is more than the absence of lies. The truth is a deeper knowledge of what really matters in life. That is why it is closely associated with that real life I was talking about.

Some of you will know that I am also a church bell-ringer. Bell ringers have a very high regard for truth. Most people here will not be surprised by this statement, because you know your bell ringers as paragons of virtue: honest and sober. Well, let’s settle for honest. But actually it was not even honesty I was referring to. Truth, as opposed to falseness, is a very important technical requirement in change ringing. In anything that we ring every change has to be different. Take as an example, the musical change 13572468, that we call “Queens.” This can only occur once in any piece of ringing, even if that is a three hour peal of 5000 changes. All 5000 have to be different. Otherwise we say the piece is false, and it can’t be counted in any records. The art of the composer of peals is to include as many musical changes as possible without repeating any. That is often quite challenging. Truth is often challenging.

This is not the end of the story, though. Truth is not enough. Telling the truth is certainly not enough. To achieve that real or authentic life I mentioned earlier, we need another quality that light brings, Love. Love is about giving ourselves to others, subjugating our own interest to that of others, showing patience, tolerance, commitment. Oh dear, I seem to have compiled a list of my increasing failings as I become a grumpy old man.

But bell ringers, other than me, are rather good at these things. Ringers know that a true peal is of no value as a composition on paper. It needs to be rung. That needs teamwork, of all types: teaching, coaching and mentoring of new ringers. Regular practice. Sacrificing your own personal wants and needs to that of the team. These are also qualities that we show in church. We attend and worship, we do jobs, take responsibility, play our part, even when it’s the last thing we feel like doing. We show toleration in taking part in styles of worship enthusiastically, when we may prefer another style. We listen politely to tedious sermons! Oh yes, we do try. But we often fail of course. We can become selfish about achieving our own goals, only using other people as far as we need them to do what we want. In church we may only turn up for services that we are comfortable with, only do jobs we like; only talk to people like us. In all of these failures, which we all share, we are entering the shadow rather than staying in the light. Love is tainted with self-interest; we are no longer living that real and authentic life.

Whether we are ringers, singers, church members, ordinary people or, dare I say, politicians we are all trying to do the right thing, to lead lives of love and service. But we consistently fail to live up to the standards we set ourselves, let alone those others may expect of us. What can we do?

We might think of ourselves as people lost in a cave of many tunnels, trying to find our way out. We need to seek the light to find the right way. The tunnel that seems to get steadily lighter is most likely to be the right one. That way lays the full light of day, of truth and love. Once we have seen that light ahead we need to forget the past mistakes, they are forgiven, not look back but keep striving for a closer approach to that light, which we know from our reading from Revelation is the Lamb, Christ our Lord. In words from Elgar’s “The Light of Life:”

*He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life… The past is dead; search not its grave for hidden faults! The remedy is ours, to seek, to find and save.*