

It's challenging to fully appreciate the hope Isaiah's prophecy contains in the first reading – especially when we live in such a wonderful part of the world. *“The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone.”* Notwithstanding the darkness which many people experience in real ways, the Sunshine State — and indeed the Sunshine Coast — could not be more aptly named as places of light. And yet, the challenge before us today is not whether God's light exists, but whether we have truly received the light God offers — light which makes our gladness **greater** and our joy **increase**. Or to put it another way: do I believe in Jesus' living presence as an idea, or have I encountered His living Presence?

In ancient times, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali — which became known as Galilee — were the northernmost regions of Israel. Because they bordered on foreign, non-Jewish territory –and because they were conquered by the Assyrian Empire in the year 732 BC – they were often associated with darkness. Matthew, in today's Gospel, sees Isaiah's prophecy of light fulfilled when Jesus began his ministry **precisely** in those places. While that **fulfilment** took place in **history** 2000 years ago, it continues to take place in **mystery** every time a person's life is transformed by the light of Christ shining upon them. Which again raises the question for us: notwithstanding His Real Presence in the Eucharist, have I encountered Jesus as an idea, or as a living presence?

What, then, is this **light** that shines on us? Twice in John's Gospel, Jesus tells us plainly: “I am the light of the world.” **The light** is not a concept or a teaching because **the light** is Jesus himself, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who reveals himself in **our** time and invites us to consciously follow him as his disciples today.

Now, if I were sitting where you are — as I did for most of my life — I’d probably be thinking: “Yeah, but I’ve been a faithful Mass-goer for years. I receive Jesus in the Eucharist every week. That’s following Jesus, isn’t it?”

It’s a fair question. And if you asked it to me, I wouldn’t answer with my own opinion, but with what people consistently share who have experienced a truly transformative encounter with the Lord. They can point to a clear “before and after,” they cannot unsee what has been revealed to them, and they begin following Jesus in new ways — especially in daily prayer and offering their lives in service of the mission. **This** is where we need to be careful not to confuse faithful practice with a transformative Encounter. Faithful practice matters deeply — but the Scriptures today are pointing us to something more. They invite us to ask honestly: have I encountered Jesus as an idea, or as a living presence – someone who loves and who speaks?

The readings describe the effects of encountering Jesus’ light in two **concrete** ways. **Firstly**, and as Saint Paul says, this takes place when people **choose** to become “*united in belief and practice.*” In our immediate context, that looks like full, conscious and active participation in the Mass; waiting lists for people wanting to serve in ministries; and parishioners lingering after Mass because they desire real relationship with one another. These aren’t parish strategies — they’re signs that the light has truly been **encountered, received & embraced**. Secondly, those whom Jesus calls respond by dropping everything to follow him. They’re willing to sign a blank cheque and say, “Here I am, send me.” That’s what happens when Jesus is encountered not just as an idea, but as a living presence.

In this moment, I’d like to recall what happened in this church on Pentecost Sunday last year. At the end of the homily, I invited all

those who knew they had experienced the power of Holy Spirit to come forward. We celebrated the fact that God is alive and at work among us. Then I invited anyone who **desired** that experience to step forward. Around 80% of the congregation gathered around the font, and we prayed for the gift of Encounter. **That desire** didn't disappear the day after Pentecost. The question in this moment is how do we **now** put **flesh** on the **desire** many of you publicly expressed. How do we effectively situate ourselves — and others — where an Encounter with the living Lord can happen?

The single most effective tool we have for facilitating experiences of Encounter is the Alpha Course. Beginning on **Tuesday the 3rd of February** in the Parish Centre, we're offering two equally important ways to respond. **One**: by **participating**, or **two**: by **serving** to help create the environment where Encounter can occur. Each session includes a shared meal, a high-quality 20-minute video, and small-group discussion. Prayer is gently introduced, along with sharing faith in a safe and welcoming environment. Places are limited due to our facilities, but there will be multiple Alpha courses offered in 2026

My invitation today is simple but **pressing**: act now on the **desire** you expressed at Pentecost by **registering** either to participate in Alpha, or to actively accompanying participants by assisting with hospitality. There's a QR code in the newsletter linking to an expression-of-interest form, and someone will be in touch. Because the real question before us today is not whether God's light is shining, but whether we are ready — now — to encounter Jesus, not as an idea, but as a living presence.