The Rt Revd Sarah Bullock, Bishop of Shrewsbury

Sunday, 25th January 2026

Sermon: *Bridging Generations — Lighting the Darkness*

Isaiah 9:1–4; Matthew 4:12–23

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

God of memory and mercy,
God of those who have suffered and those who remember,
God who calls us to truth and compassion,
Be with us as we listen, reflect, and remember.
Give us light for our thinking, courage for our speaking,
And Knowledge of your love enough to shape how we live.
Amen.

Good evening, and thank you for the invitation to be here.

Now, some of you here this evening, may not describe yourselves as religious. Some may never have opened a Bible. Yet many of you might say that you are *spiritually interested* — attentive to meaning, alert to questions of justice, identity, belonging, and hope.

That attentiveness matters.

I also want to be honest about where I stand. I speak as a Christian and as someone whose life has been shaped — not by having everything neatly resolved — but by a long, always questioning, always deeply sustaining journey of faith in Jesus.

That faith has been nurtured by family, by church communities, by people who have prayed with me and challenged me, and by encounters that have slowly convinced me that love, truth, and hope are not illusions — but gifts to be lived.

Remembering Holocaust Memorial Day

We gather tonight ahead of Holocaust Memorial Day (which falls on Tuesday) — a time when we remember the six million Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust, the millions of others persecuted under Nazi ideology, and victims of genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and many other places.

Each of these histories is distinct. Each must be remembered with care and truth. And yet together they confront us with a devastating pattern: what can happen when people are divided into "us" and "them", when fear is cultivated, and when some lives are judged to matter less than others.

Holocaust Memorial Day holds together particular remembrance and universal responsibility. It asks not only *what happened then?* but *what must we learn now?*

Bridging generations

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2026 is *Bridging Generations*.

We are living at a moment when many survivors are no longer here to speak in their own voices. Memory is increasingly entrusted to those who did not witness these events directly.

That does not lessen our responsibility. It deepens it.

To bridge generations is to carry stories carefully — not as relics of the past, but as moral warnings for the present and the future. It is to ensure that truth is not diluted, denial not normalised, and indifference not inherited.

Memory becomes light when it guides how we live.

Light spoken into darkness

Our first reading tonight comes from the prophet Isaiah, writing into a time of political turmoil and fear. The people are living under threat from powerful empires. They are anxious about identity, security, and survival.

Isaiah does not deny the darkness. He names it.

And yet he says:

"*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."*

Darkness here is not simply personal despair. It is social darkness — injustice, violence, oppression, and fear shaping public life.

Light, in Scripture, is not sentiment. It is truth breaking through lies. It is dignity restored where it has been denied.

These words were treasured and passed down through generations — especially by Jewish communities who knew too well what it meant to live under threat.

Jesus speaks into his own dangerous moment

And our gospel reading:

Matthew's Gospel deliberately places Jesus within this tradition.

But it also tells us something crucial about timing.

Jesus begins his public ministry after John the Baptist has been arrested. John has criticised corruption and injustice. His imprisonment is a warning: speaking truth now carries risk.

The political landscape is volatile. Roman occupation dominates daily life. Violence is always near the surface. Religious leaders themselves are divided — some seeking accommodation, others resistance, many fearful.

This is not a safe moment to speak.

And yet Jesus does.

He goes to Galilee — a borderland, marginal, mixed region — and begins to proclaim:

"*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

This is not a private spiritual message. It is profoundly political — not party-political, but about how power is understood.

Jesus is saying: the world does not have to be ordered by domination, fear, and exclusion.

To repent means to turn — to turn away from ways of thinking that divide humanity into insiders and outsiders, worthy and unworthy.

And here we meet the danger of othering.

The danger of othering

Othering begins with language: "they are not like us."
It grows into suspicion: "they are a problem."
It ends in dehumanisation: "they do not matter as we do."

We see this clearly in the Holocaust.
We see it again and again in every genocide.
And we see echoes of it today — in the rhetoric of political movements and leaders across our world who trade in fear, who simplify complex human beings into threats, and who normalise contempt.

Othering is always a spiritual danger.

Because once people are no longer fully human in our imagination, violence becomes possible — even justifiable.

Jesus — the Light of the World

Christian faith makes a bold claim here.

Jesus does not simply speak about light — he embodies it.

Later in the Gospel he says:

"*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Light, in Christian faith, is not an idea. It is a person.

Jesus stands against othering by crossing boundaries — eating with the excluded, touching the untouchable, speaking with those despised by society.

He refuses to divide the world into "us" and "them". Instead, he calls people into community.

And he invites others to follow him — not as spectators, but as participants.

Faith carried in community

My own faith has been sustained not in isolation, but in community — in church members who have prayed when words failed, in family who have shaped my values long before I could articulate them, in friendships across faiths that have deepened rather than threatened my Christian commitment.

Faith, for me, has never been about certainty or superiority. It has been about learning, again and again, how to choose love over fear — and light over darkness.

As Chair of the Council of Christians and Jews, I see daily how relationships across difference resist othering. When people know one another by name, hatred loses its power.

Lighting the darkness — then and now

The Bible's movement is clear:

Isaiah speaks of light promised.
Jesus embodies that light.
And his followers are called to carry it.

Jesus says to his disciples:

"*You are the light of the world."*

Not because they are perfect — but because light is meant to be shared.

Lighting the darkness is not dramatic heroism.

It is daily courage: refusing hateful language, standing with those targeted, telling the truth, remembering faithfully, teaching the next generation.

So as we remember the Holocaust and all victims of genocide, and as we seek to bridge generations, the question before us is not abstract:

What kind of people do we want to be?

Will we allow fear to shape our future —or will we choose light?

For me, that choice is rooted in Jesus — the light of the world — whose life and teaching convinces me that:

love is stronger than hatred,

truth stronger than lies,

and hope stronger than despair.

Our story of hope calls us to be people who refuse to let one another walk in darkness alone — who choose instead to light the darkness together.

Amen.