

Epiphany 5: 9 February Matthew 5:13-20 Salt and Light

Be still for a moment or two. Focus on the words salt and light and see what kind of images emerge.

It is good to be here, with you, salt and light of the world.. That is what Jesus called the crowd listening to him. That is what he calls us: Salt and light, with all their rich associations.

For three chapters, Matthew pulls together a number of Jesus' teachings to form a very long sermon; our short gospel passage is a hinge between the Beatitudes which we heard last week, and the difficult instructions that follow, some of which we'll hear in the next few weeks, when Matthew's Jesus repeatedly raises the standard for his own followers ("you have heard it said...but I say to you..."). Today, Jesus uses two common, everyday images to tell his disciples to remember who they are.

After lifting up the mostly unlikely people--the poor in spirit, the meek and the merciful, those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted--and calling them "blessed," or as Nikolai put it in his sermon at Radford, "successful", Jesus then addresses the crowd as "you," and offers them words of both reassurance and challenge. The "you," is, of course, plural, to be heard by us not as private, pious Christians but as the Community of Christ in the world God loves.

Like that second generation of Christians in Matthew's community, we listen with the crowd to hear that we, too, are

"the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." While Jesus is telling us who or what we are, these metaphors are about what we do, how we do it, and the effect of what we do in the world.' <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/restoring-beauty.html>

The images of salt and light are packed with many meanings. Yet, two thousand years later, we still understand that salt that isn't salty isn't much good for anything, while just a little flavourful salt can have an impact far beyond its size, spreading through the whole of something much larger. A simple, even humble image, salt had many different associations for Jesus' audience. Salt served as currency in some ancient civilisations. The English word 'salary' comes from the Latin word sal, 'salt': soldiers in the Roman army were paid a salt allowance.

Salt not only strengthens flavour and preserves food but in ancient times was rubbed on newborn children, used to seal covenants, sprinkled on sacrifices, and understood as a metaphor for wisdom. No wonder, then, that salt became associated with God's activity in the world.

Another way to say it might be: You add wisdom, zest and flavour to the life of the whole world. Go for it. Be who you are, and make your unique difference in the world.

In every age, we know that "light" means many things, not the least of them hope. Earlier in his Gospel (4:16), Matthew spoke of Jesus by recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah (9:2a), that "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." Those who feel lost, or in despair, or confused, those who have no idea which way to turn: on them "light has dawned." In Jesus, we find our way, and in turn, we're called to be the Body of Christ in the world today: Jesus tells

us to "let our light shine before others," to let the good things that we do, rather than pointing to us, radiate God's own goodness and love in the world."

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, said:

People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.

We are salt and light.

William Loader writes:

To shine as a light, to be salt, and to be a city on a hill is to be living out the attitudes espoused in the beatitudes. God is light. Jesus is light. And, says Matthew's Jesus, so are you! But not as an elite, as a group of privileged people, be they of Israel or of the church, who once, perhaps, were good salt, but as people living the kind of life called for in the challenge of the beatitudes. The language of light and city had been used of Israel.. For Matthew there is continuity here. The disciples of Jesus stand in continuity with Israel, are true Israel in what it was called to be.

When people encounter us--as individuals and as communities of faith--I hope they see and sense more: they feel hope, they feel the possibility of a "different world, ".
We're called not to make just a refreshing but a reinvigorating difference in the world, so that all who watch us will feel new life, new vitality, new possibility, new hope, new beauty.

The church is no secret society, Jesus tells us, right from the beginning. Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*, "We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill....Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand--shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives."

Now, look at this building, this place of worship and daily living- exercise classes, celebrations, lunches, dinners, meditation, orchestra practice, yoga, play group, dance, play. Look at this building where we come to worship God. It is built low to the ground, to give the feeling of being amongst the community, rather than sitting high on a hill looking aloof and separated from the people.

What does it say to you about this community?

What does it say to you about the God we worship?

What I see is this: Light coming into the centre, light caressing us, burning us. Light through the windows. I see the outside world- trees, green, flowers, buildings, cars. The outside comes in, we are part of it. What happens here is seen by the outside, and we, in here, see what happens outside. There is transparency, and movement, inside and out, but not ostentatiousness.

The building rests on and is supported by a cross. The structure of the building is an expression of the fact that without Christ the Christian church would fall down. The main structural frame consists of two large steel beams, intersecting to form a cross. This cross takes the majority of the roof load and all functions in the church are defined within the cross's arms, including the labyrinth. The

intersection of the two beams forms a movement transferring haunch, which is elongated to form a Christian cross “keystone”, without which the structure would literally fall down. “How true of life!”

It sits lightly on the earth, a tent which can be taken down, changed, moved. It is accessible. There are no steps. The doors are wide enough for all to enter. The facilities and chapel are all accessible.

It is supported by a cross, and is focussed on a cross, which you notice is outside. We are not to be insular. Christ is outside as well as here.

The structure guides our focus to the sanctuary, the place of celebration, of the weekly feast, the taste of the heavenly banquet, where all are welcome, and further, beyond, outside to the cross and the world.

So what does this say of God?

It speaks of Light, transparency, being in the world, openness, inclusiveness, simplicity, beauty.

Salt and light.

What does this say of us, or our aspirations?

It speaks of being Light, transparent, being in the world, being open, inclusive, simple, beautiful.

Salt and light.... playful even, not taking ourselves too seriously. The openness of the space means we see ourselves as part of others, we live in community. We are not alone in this. In fact we need each other.

The beautiful green frontals in memory of Betty and Noel Cooper remind us of this, trees growing together, but separate..

So look around you at this space.
What does it say to you?
How does it inspire you?
Are there any surprises?
Things which grate. I am sure there are some..
To what does it call you?

Today we commission Sarah Bachelard and Anne Dudzinski to our staff team. We begin a new chapter, after saying goodbye to Sarah and Ian last week, Sarah Bachelard begins and Anne is recognised for the wonderful, role she plays here in the Nursing homes. Both are already familiar with this space, Anne, through many years of faithful service, visiting, preaching, playgroup, and nursing homes, Sarah, through Benedictus which has been worshipping here for two years now on a Saturday evening. Sarah and Anne have both prayed in this space, led studies, and meditation. They have had many coffees at Ricardos with me and others. Sarah has lived in Cook off and on for most of her life. Now she joins this community, bringing her considerable gifts and grace to share with us in being light and salt in our world, listening, being, acting to make a difference with us.

The image I have of myself in this place is of a well, fed by an underground stream, I am not the water, I am the container. The water flows through me, the light flows through me. my task is to be. To be present, to be whole. Keeping the channels open through prayer and meditation. The well is a place for people to come and drink deeply and be refreshed. To rest. A place where they can look and see their reflection and see who they truly are. Where they too

can sit . Be. Become. Nurtured. Living water. And spaciousness, wherever I am, wherever you are.

Sarah Bachelard writes in our weekly bulletin:

The poet W.B. Yeats said, 'there is another world, but it is in this one'. One of the things that inspires me about a local parish church is that it witnesses, by its simple presence, to the reality of this 'other' world and invites anyone to share in it. It makes visible the deep and timeless current of love, forgiveness, and grace which, though we sometimes forget it, is this world's truest fulfilment and our own deepest yearning.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus calls the disciples to be agents of this 'other' world, to make it known. He calls them to be 'salt' and 'light', their very presence flavouring and illuminating, enlivening and preserving their communities. This commission means not denying or replacing the world, but transforming it. We begin to fulfil it, not by performing heroic feats of religious righteousness, but by being ourselves transformed. 'You are the salt of the earth', Jesus says; 'but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?'

Last week's beatitudes and our reading from 1 Corinthians point the way to this transformation, this restoration of our 'saltiness'. Poverty of spirit, the vulnerability of unknowing, giving up self-righteousness. And as we consent to walk this way, who knows what other gifts of love might be set free around us?

Resources used for sermon:

<http://muddiedprayers.com/2013/06/11/missional-metaphors-salt-and-light/>

<http://www.goodnews.ie/jacobswellheer.shtml>

<http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/restoring-beauty.html>

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEpiphany5.htm>

Susanna Pain

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