

Ordinary 5A – Salt and Light

1 Corinthians 2.1-12, Matthew 5.13-20

Tristan shared with us last week the insight that Jesus' teaching is not a nice set of stand-alone values that can be lifted out of its gospel context. The Beatitudes cut across the ways of the world. The life Jesus wanted his followers to embrace was so revolutionary it got him killed and led to a whole heap of persecution for his disciples.

It can be hard to see this after two thousand years of Christendom, where the priorities of the gospel have been woven into our society and culture. In fact, there are lots of people who claim that there is no necessary connection between faith in God and the good teachings of Jesus, the rabbi from Galilee. Jesus' whole life and ministry is thus reduced to a set of moral precepts, which can be summarised as "dear people, be nice."

But being salt and light in the world doesn't follow from mere niceness. A feature of both salt and light is that a little goes a long way. Try drinking a big glass of water with half a teaspoon of salt mixed into it, or on the positive side, try eating a plate of boiled potatoes or an ear of sweetcorn with no salt at all! Likewise, notice how the darkness retreats in a room with just one tiny candle, or consider how a lighthouse is visible across miles of ocean at night.

The calling that Jesus gave to his disciples was meant to result in a community so distinctive, so radiant, so *alive*, that despite being tiny to begin with, they would become God's instrument for the healing of the world. Life in the realm of God, Jesus said, fulfils and exceeds life lived in accordance with the law. Those who joined themselves to Jesus were not just called to live by a certain ethical code, but to live "as Christ," plugged into the power and the Spirit of God, and after his resurrection becoming his living presence in the world.

Jesus' teaching just doesn't make any sense apart from his life and ministry, and his death and his resurrection. You don't get to have his "values" without his crucifixion. You don't get to have "love your neighbour" without "pray for those who persecute you." You don't get to have "blessed are those who mourn" without the risen Christ breathing his Spirit into his shattered and grieving friends.

Jesus can't be replaced by ethics, because he *himself* is the fulfilment of what the law promised. Our faith is in the *spiritual life he makes possible in us* rather than in some notion of a good society formed along Christian precepts. So being "salt" and "light" is not a case of getting the right take on the rules in the manner of the Scribes and the Pharisees, but is about conforming our lives – heart, soul, mind and strength – to the person of Christ, so that God's Spirit and God's power are present through us as they were in Jesus.

The light we are meant to shine with is the radiance that brought worlds into being. We can't generate that light by ourselves; we can only receive and reflect it. And once we've opened our hearts to it, we need to make sure we don't pull the curtains tight against the outside world, enjoying the cosy light within but shutting out those who need to be welcomed into its warmth.

Shining with the light of Christ is about opening those curtains and sharing our lives with others as the body, the community, of Christ. There are choices to make about how we do this well. And, as the Beatitudes remind us, those choices will not make us popular. What salty goodness might we expect to see from God's people that goes against the grain of our current times?

Certainly the kinds of actions towards justice that we saw in our video earlier, paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah: *break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts, share your food with the hungry, shelter the wanderer, clothe the naked and don't turn away from your own flesh and blood.*

In addition, there are some other, perhaps more subtle, postures that could allow the light of God's people to break forth like the dawn in our troubled times.

We get some clues to them in St Paul's letter to the Corinthians we heard from this morning.

I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. The church of God will not be swayed by impressive people or "superior speech," but will value and prioritise people who are considered of no importance by the standards of our society. The community of God remembers that our primary example of a glorified human is one who suffered unjustly on a cross. When we relate to others it's from the conviction that every person's testimony can reveal something of the mystery of God. The church of God must reject the cult of celebrity and persuasion and instead honour its weakest members.

For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

The people of God must seek spiritual wisdom and not mistake information for understanding. People's minds are not machines. We must resist the assumption that human thought is simply information processing that computers can do better than we can. Genuine human discoveries emerge from our embodied reality; they are the product of will, curiosity, affection, reflection, attention, pain, memory, sensory experience, and the subtle movements of our spirits, all held and interwoven with the Divine Breath that sustains us. No amount of computer technology can replicate the wondrous workings of the human mind-body-spirit, and our embodied consciousness. The church of God seeks God's wisdom by bringing our human forms of knowing into prayer, in submission to the Spirit of God, rather than grasping after the counterfeit divinity held out to us by the grifters of Silicon Valley.

And finally,

...we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory, [which] God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

The church of God must continue to insist on the priority of the unseen, the reality of the spiritual dimension that animates all things, and the mystery of God to redeem and transfigure what looks and feels like loss. We live in a story of great and hidden depths, and everything is not as it seems. A man, dying on a cross of execution, was and is the salvation of the world. The destitute worker striking for better conditions so she can feed her family, the mourning mother holding a sign outside an embassy, the meek politician that doesn't have the "killer instinct" to trash talk his opponents, the activist musician who is booed off the stage – these are not rejects or fools, but people caught up in the slipstream of that crucified man, sharing in his death, yes, but also sharing in his resurrection, in the wisdom and glory of God.

Salt of the earth and light to the world. It's an extraordinary commission, and not one that we can choose simply by desiring or deciding to be ethical. Instead, it's a spiritual path that unites us to Jesus Christ in his incarnation, his life and death, and in his resurrection – a mystery indeed, and one for which we can only give wondering thanks.

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