

“In the vacant places  
We will build with new bricks  
Where the bricks are fallen  
We will build with new stone  
Where the beams are rotten  
We will build with new timbers  
Where the word is unspoken  
We will build with new speech  
There is work together  
A Church for all  
And a job for each.”

- T.S Eliot<sup>1</sup>

There is work to do together. Jesus’ calling to us to be salt and light in this world has not gone away. But it is fair to say that, in our disconnection from the world around us, the Church’s salt has lost its taste, and our light is feebly flickering.

Some of that is our own fault. We have let ourselves become sidetracked, defensive, complacent and divided. The things that have mattered most to us have not been the things that matter most to God. We have become spiritually shallow, lacking the deep wisdom of God and instead distracted by anxiety about relevance, and focused either on private morality or being a good citizen.

Even those parts of the church that have been most explicit in their quest for justice have lacked spiritual power, putting their trust in political change rather than the transformation of hearts that only God’s Spirit can achieve.

Some of our unsaltiness and dimness of light, though, is not just our fault. We live in an age that is increasingly hostile to organised forms of religion, where the media seems determined to elevate extreme points of view; this then becomes how the church is perceived.

The quiet, faithful work of small communities is invisible because we have no desire or ability to self-promote – to sell our Christianity to a world that responds only to brands, marketing and skilled manipulation of networks. We are trying to protect silence, prayer, rest, local place, and face-to-face human connection, in a world that is increasingly noisy, busy, global and virtual.

People have accepted, almost without question, the notion that ‘science’ has ‘disproved’ God and taken over from religion, even though they still want to use spiritual practices to experience calmness and peace.

In the midst of all this, we still have a work to do. Faithfulness to the gospel means we don’t just throw up our hands and walk out of the sandpit saying ‘I’m not playing anymore.’ We stay open and present to this world while rooting ourselves further and further into the

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<sup>1</sup> The use of this poem extract, and some of the imagery in this sermon is drawn from L. William Countryman’s book ‘Calling on the Spirit in Unsettling Times,’ a text I highly recommend.

deep truths that only come from God's ordering of things, God's creation, God's wisdom.

Though, as St Paul says, God's wisdom, that we're trying to sink into, 'is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age.' The spiritual wisdom that will enable us to be salt and light is 'secret and hidden' now, just as it was in Paul's day. That's not because it's only available to the super smart or the spiritually elite, but because it's a wisdom of weakness that is so often contrary to the ways of the world: 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'

We can't, under our own steam or by our own cleverness, know anything true about God or engage in true action in the world. Spiritual maturity does not involve becoming increasingly skilled and effective in the ways of the world. It means being able to discern and live out of this hidden wisdom that comes from God's Spirit in us.

Over the last week many people have learned more than they ever wanted to about cleaning up and re-building after a flood. I think there are lessons we, in the church, can take from this process. It's been raining for a long time around us, and the flood waters of our own failings and the cultural shifts that have happened around us are rising. People respond to this in different ways and it can take some people a while to realise that something genuinely drastic is going on. Some of our precious belongings – our former ways of doing things, cherished beliefs and ideas – these are floating around us, some salvageable, some contaminated by the floodwaters and needing to be cleaned, some gone forever.

Let's imagine for a moment that we have been granted a sunny day, a chance to dry out, clean up and repair. As we call on God's Spirit to guide this process, what is the spiritual wisdom we need, and how shall we put it into practice so that we have fresh, salty salt, and bright light to share with others?

1. Call on friends and neighbours. We can't do this clean-up alone. Rebuilding is the work of community and we need each other. Thankfully, we have the wider church, our local faith community, and the whole communion of saints to shape this task with us.
2. Once the house has been submerged for long enough, you can't dry out floors and walls with the carpet and the wallpaper and gib still on. Some of the trimmings and the comforts have to be pared back to their basic structures, to maintain integrity and strength. What are the foundations and structural pillars and beams of the church? Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. The gathered Community, the Scriptures and the Sacraments as places where we encounter Christ now. Prayer as the life-breath of the Church. And love for God and neighbour as the guiding principle for all our work.
3. Some of our possessions hold our identity, others are just things that can be let go. In a disaster we do all we can to save our photos, our journals, our precious mementos. They tell our story and hold our memories and help make us who we are. In the Church, just like in our homes, the things that matter to us have an element of preference.

For me, the 'possessions' I want to hold on to through this cultural storm are the

prayer book tradition, with its liturgies and rhythms of the day and year, certain kinds of spiritual art and music, and the experience and wisdom of our ancestors distilled in theological writings and spiritual biography.

Other faithful people might prioritise differently. It's all good – that's why we have different churches – but we should have a reason for why we value what we do, and also be prepared to 'clean up' – that is, re-evaluate, and revise and renew – the things we cherish.

4. In the rebuilding, the re-creating of our church life, we must rely on the Spirit's guidance and wisdom to help us find both a new and a mature way forward, to bring to the fore images of God and language for faith in Christ that speak to the times we're in. We can't just go on building homes for ourselves to enjoy in ever-dwindling numbers. What's the point of rebuilding something that's not providing meaningful and joyful shelter for others?

We need to find ways to share our faith in Jesus Christ crucified and the goodness and love of God with anyone whose heart longs for more than what this world offers – and to do so in ways that connect with *their hearts*, not just our own. Only through God's Spirit activating our imaginations and our creativity and our actions will a genuinely compelling spiritual way forward be found. Nurturing the gifts of contemplation and discernment will be part of this task.

Those are my beginning thoughts. As you reflect on this metaphor of cleaning up, repairing and re-building, what are the priorities that come to mind for you? What are you hearing the Spirit saying to us, the Church?

*(Pause for reflection)*

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