



Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

6th February 2011

Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 112, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16, Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

It's quite interesting to listen to the readings and hear the word of God in competition with the traffic. Certainly, the first reading (from the house of David) rather than hear it, what I heard was trucks and buses passing by – it's a stunning sign of where we are. The noise of the world passes by, while we have stopped and entered a stillness, to see and to then bring to life. The window behind - this is the light from the sun, which some people think is Jesus. It started here this morning, a sign that you brought it. It is from the Body. By the time we got to the gospel reading, look, it has moved to here, to enlighten the word. And it will continue its journey toward the sanctuary, drawing us toward the Divine. It is important what we see and what we make seen. Paul, like many of us, wrestles with the Divine Truth, that which is evidenced and revealed in and through Christ. And like many of us, as he puts his 'knowing God' into words so he ties himself up in theological knots. It is important for us to see the Bible and other Sacred Texts not as the last word of God, rather as a living Word, a Word of invitation for us to continue the quest that they spoke and speak into being, and to continue revealing that which is beyond our sight and beyond our understanding.

Paul says "*I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.*" Rather Paul sought to provide by his very being "*a demonstration of the Spirit and of the power of God.*" It is quite ironic that throughout history of the church that it's Paul's 'lofty words' that are proclaimed as the definitive 'Word of God' and the ultimate wisdom of all that is revealed in Christ.

There is another confusing knot of irony in today's extract from one of Paul's letters. Like most subsequent Christians, Paul proclaims the significance of "Christ crucified". For Paul, the Easter event of crucifixion and resurrection is at the very centre of all that is revealed in Christ. And yet in verse 8 he says "*None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*" On the one hand Paul sees Easter as a revelation that takes the faith and understanding of the Hebrew people into a new paradigm; and on the other hand, he puts Easter down to an action resulting from the misunderstanding of the rulers of that age. Here, like many of us, Paul confuses the "seen" with the "unseen" and so the threads of theology become knotted. It is these sorts of confusions in the scriptures, and then even more confusion when teachers, theologians and priests add their interpretations, that call the whole body of sacred texts into question.

Let's follow another example of tying theological knots based on the first reading. Isaiah proclaims the true fast we should choose as our offering and practice of worshipping God: "*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house...*", - two among many other biblical Christian 'to do's' that are asked of us, to feed the hungry and to bring the homeless into your house. But if we follow a common and very logical critique, we might readily appreciate that if I share my bread with the hungry it still will not make a lot of difference to the 40,000 children who will die of starvation today. Likewise, bringing the homeless into my home - it's not going to make a big difference!

And it's those sorts of confusions, those questions that pop out when we read the sacred texts, that lead slowly to a devaluation of the scriptures - they no longer hold the apparent truth, they no longer empower our being, because if we read them and don't embody them, we must at some point push them to one side and devalue them. And again, in time, we experience the results of our confusion... *bring the homeless poor into your house* has become almost the opposite paradigm of our approach to refugees around the world. It is as if the very saltiness of the Divine Word has lost its taste. And yet, we're here, we've come back together, we still have a lingering, a longing taste for the Divine Word. We still have the taste St Augustine experienced when he says, "*I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.*"

So perhaps we need to start again, or at least to wrestle with more intentionality, as Paul did, with OUR understanding and OUR experience of the Divine. Use Paul as a reference point, but what is *our* understanding and *our* experience of the Word of God that empowers? When the earth was discovered to be a globe, a sphere, and not a flat surface, the maps had to be redrawn. The road map from Jerusalem to Jericho remained the same, but it now had to be set into a different context, another map; so too with the Holy Scriptures. We are very different beings to those who grappled with theology 2000 years ago, and we need to reclaim the scriptures within the context of our own world and within our own lives. We have seen some of what was unseen back then, and rather than hide our enlightenment under the bushel of orthodoxy, we need to put it on a lamp stand and re-read the Word of God in that new light.

Isaiah calls for a movement in our Worship, a movement from the pew to the political. It is not enough to "*day after day seek God and delight to know God's ways... to be a people that practise righteousness and do not forsake the ordinance of our God.*" It's not enough. Isaiah seeks that "*your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly*". Isaiah sees us participating as repairers and restorers, and so to participate as re-creators. Guided by the Divine light, we too are called to "shine as a light in the world". It is a movement for those, and of those, empowered by the revelation of Christ, it is a call out of the world that makes a noise and just continues endlessly. It is a call out of *that* world into the unseen, into the world that is birthed in Divine truth, rather than birthed in worldly corruption, or at best, worldly confusion. It is a call to live in the light of the psalm response we shared earlier, '*Our Delight is in the Divine, in whose light we shine*'. It is a call to actually

grasp that *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”*

This is delightfully affirmed in the gospel: *“You are the salt of the earth”*. And rather than crawl into a bushel of doubt with a disbelieving ‘who me?’ we might acknowledge how such a truth is experienced in our lives and in the present. *“You are the salt of the earth.”* Of course ‘we are the salt of the earth’; look at how humanity has flavoured the whole of creation. The shape, the very life of the planet is changed by the footprint of humanity. We are the salt of the earth, YOU are the salt of the earth. And furthermore, [v20]

“I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The gospel echoes the insight of Isaiah, and the ‘*scribes and Pharisees*’ are the same today as they were yesterday. The religious leaders, the gatekeepers of orthodoxy, the cultural teachers and those who shape our political paths, these are the very institutions that we must rightfully exceed. We are called into a new paradigm, we’re called into a place of unseen truth, we’re called to go beyond what is seen, what is visible ‘in the world’ and to bring light, to embody an enlightenment that will [v12] *“raise up the foundations of many generations”*, and repair. We are called to participate in the energy of, in the Spirit of, “I AM making all things new”. And I think we are in the process of that very movement; we are sharing today in the insight of Isaiah, and we are flavouring the world with our saltiness.

It is evidenced not in any one of us, but in our communion. The shape of St Paul’s has changed; the very stonework of St Paul’s has come out from its 100 year old bushel and has gone beyond what it was. Those who come to St Paul’s find a new flavour that often exceeds the expectations of their previous taste of church. And in this Spirit, on these very foundations, we continue to build. Each and all giving flavour, adding saltiness, enlightening our very being, and so changing the shape of the world.

We are the salt of the earth
You are the salt of the earth
Amen

Peter Humphris