

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 5 Feb 2017

[Isaiah 58:1-12 ; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-16; Matthew 5:13-20](#) Vanderbilt Divinity Library
[Epiphany 5A February 5, 2017](#) Textweek

Following the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus outlined the qualities of the "Blessed" and so gave us an orientation of life lived in true happiness; he goes on, in today's gospel reading, to give simple and clear metaphors that speak of and empower the very character of those "blessed"; and in doing so he is giving us his vision of the character and nature of the 'Church'.

The selection of readings that we heard before the gospel is very much aligned with the vision that Jesus puts forward;

You are the salt of the earth
You are the light of the world.

To fully explore the enormity of these metaphors, and their meaning to us today we can start with the first reading.

The prophetic writing of Isaiah fully echoes the teaching of Christ; Isaiah also speaks of a life orientation, and he speaks of blessing,

"you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

Isaiah is also drawn to use the same metaphor for illustration:

"your **light** shall break forth like the dawn."

Isaiah is speaking to the congregation of the faithful, to "my people", God's people, and to the "*house of Jacob*"; so here today he also speaks to us and to all the Church and the congregation of today's faithful.

Like Jesus in the gospel, Isaiah calls our religious practices to account with the "as if" in verse two:

"day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, **as if** they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God."

Sunday by Sunday the Church seeks God and delights to know the ways of God, as if we too

"practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of our[their] God".

And then Isaiah goes on to name what is evident to various degrees in every religion and in every congregation of the faithful; following that criticism in verses three through five he asks:

"Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"

Is what we do Sunday after Sunday a practice that is acceptable to God?

Isaiah then provides another vision of fasting, another vision of religious practice:

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is

it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

This new vision that Isaiah puts before the practice of temple (or Church) worship, as we see in the very next line, is what brings us into integrity with the metaphors that Jesus used; Isaiah identifies this as a life orientation in which "your light shall break forth like the dawn".

We see also in the psalm a very similar connection with what we do and the experience of "Blessed", and once again the image of "light" is employed to make the point:

"4 Light arises in darkness for the upright: gracious and merciful are the righteous.

5 It goes well with those who act generously and lend: who guide their affairs with justice."

And then the same sentiment is repeated in reverse order as if to underline the movement toward blessing:

"8 Their hearts are confident and will not fear: they will see the downfall of their enemies.

9 They give freely to the poor: their righteousness stands for ever, their head is uplifted in glory."

What the Psalm also does is underline that the whole religious enterprise is about what we do outside of the Temple/Church rather than what we do in the rituals of religious practice.

The two images that are used in the gospel are being used to illuminate who we are as members of the Body of Christ, and they do very much illuminate a very different paradigm to that which was being taught by the religious leaders of the time.

You are the salt of the earth
You are the light of the world.

These two metaphors would have been a real threat to the order of the faith community; they took the power out of the hands of the priest and placed it fully into the hands of each of us and all of us.

But that is only part of this new vision, and new understanding; Isaiah calls into question the whole place and purpose of the accepted religious practices, and so too does the teaching of Jesus.

It is not worship that characterises our "*righteousness*"; it is not our attendance at the Temple that creates us as "*Blessed*", rather what Jesus opens up is a new paradigm, as was also identified by Isaiah.

When we are being told

You are the salt of the earth
You are the light of the world.

We are not looking at a saviour, and we are not looking at a Messiah, what we are being asked to consider is our potential.

In the New testament reading Paul is explaining himself, seeking to be understood within the early church for even in those emerging early days of the Church the new vision of Christ was constantly being misunderstood.

Part of that misunderstanding was the expectation that it was Christ who was the enabler of salvation; but Paul has more fully appreciated that which Jesus taught.

It is not Jesus who is salt and light it is us.

Paul explains:

“For what human being 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. 12 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.”

And at the end of the reading today, he reiterates his explanation in a very simple summary:

“we have the mind of Christ.”

The expected messiah, is to be found within ourselves, we are the ‘salt’ and the ‘light’ as Jesus taught; and that really does open a new way of understanding religious worship and practice; we are not here to delight in the ways of God, and we are not here to acknowledge Jesus as the Saviour of the world, rather we are here to find ourselves.

Today we hear from three different voices that the finding of ourselves lies beyond what we do here today.

Isaiah calls into question the pretence of religious practice with the reality check of “as if”; the Paul reminds us that we “have the mind of Christ”, and Jesus teaches that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

You are the salt of the earth
You are the light of the world.

And here today in making Eucharist that is what we give thanks for, that is what we come together to more fully realise.

And perhaps in the week ahead we might then contemplate the metaphors:

You are the salt of the earth

Where do I add flavour to the future of humanity?
In what ways do I bring out the taste of life?
Where do my tears join with the tide of Humanity’s ocean?

You are the light of the world

What path do I illuminate and for whom?
Where do I shine in another’s darkness
What is this splendid torch I hold?

Peter Humphris