

*Matthew 5. 13-20*

*(Jesus said) "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Today's gospel continues from last week's, when we heard the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. What we heard last week was a call to discipleship, as we read the 'Blessed are' statements, the Beatitudes. Jesus expanded on this and described his followers using the metaphors of 'salt' and 'light'.

Note that he didn't say 'You must try really hard to be salt and light in the world'; he said, 'You ARE the salt of the earth; you ARE the light of the world'. Jesus gives his followers the capacity to both demonstrate goodness in themselves and to bring out the goodness in others.

Just as salt can bring out the flavour in food, we can make a great difference in the world as we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

The gathered community of the church is a light to all around, acting as a mirror that reflects God's goodness.

The metaphor of 'light' is a useful one; just as one little candle or torch can light up a room, so each individual's life makes a difference in the world. And just as a chandelier can light up a great big space, so the worshipping community together can shed light much further.

Perhaps a lighthouse is a good illustration: light from the source is magnified and directed by special lenses that make the light much brighter and able to travel further. If Jesus is the source of the light, maybe we can be like those lenses- shining brightly all around our communities.

We are called to go into the dark spaces, bringing Christ's light to the places where people suffer and struggle and are fearful.

We are also called to enter into our own dark places, to expose our deepest, darkest thoughts, guilts and fears to the light of God's forgiveness. We need to discover where light needs to shine in our own hearts.

There is darkness in life, we would all agree. The world often seems dark and broken, and Jesus encourages us to bring out the light of the good news, which draws people to its warmth and radiance.

This is the mission of the church and always has been: to shine the light of Christ in the world. It was Archbishop William Temple who famously said, "The church is the only organisation on earth that exists for those who are not its members." Is that the way we think about 'our' church? It is all too easy to believe that the church, at least our local church, exists for US.

After all, we do all the work of maintaining the buildings, giving our money and time, volunteering, fund-raising, doing all the many jobs needed to keep a parish functioning and able to offer worship and more. However, that isn't the only way Jesus saw his followers being salt and light in the world. He wants us to fulfil the law: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Isaiah told his people around 500 years before Jesus that their light would shine only if they stopped oppressing their workers and acting unjustly and started feeding the poor and looking after their own families.

The writer wanted people to know that worship should lead us to care about other people; worship should unsettle us, should trouble our consciences, should make our contentment and self-satisfaction disappear like smoke.

How can we be the salt of the earth and a light to the nations if all we do is worship privately on Sundays? What would it be like to be salt and light on all the other days of the week? To add yet another metaphor, if we answer God's call to shine we will be swimming against the tide. God's wisdom, as Paul describes in his first letter to the church in Corinth, is radically different to the world's wisdom.

When we live and move in the world as disciples of Jesus our lives are different- and not everyone will appreciate light shining in their darkness. We should not be surprised to encounter opposition, criticism or the scorn of those whose behaviour we refuse to emulate.

Jane Williams writes that Jesus says his disciples are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world because:

"Their faith is not just- or even primarily- about themselves, but about their participation in God's work in the world. This is the fulfilment of the law, according to Jesus. The law is essentially a corporate thing. It is designed to build a people whose life together reflects the nature of God and so makes it more credible to others."

Being salt and light is only sustainable when we are part of a worshipping community. That is why Jesus told us to meet together, to pray and work and share our lives. It isn't about our own comfort and wellbeing; Jesus never said, "Follow me and you will always be happy and content"- far from it!

Next week we will have the pleasure of officially welcoming Joanna Colgan, a Formation Student who has been placed in this parish this year. Joanna has taken the courageous step of answering God's call on her life. She has risked the ridicule of those who may never understand why on earth anyone would want to serve and work for the church. She will continue to work extremely hard to be better equipped for her ministry.

Not everyone is called to be a disciple in this particular way but we are ALL called to be salt and light. May we have the courage to ask God where we are called to serve.