

# ***Salt and Light***

## ***Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany***

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# **Sunday, February 5, 2023**

Last week, I spoke about the three dimensions of faith - to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. This week, I would like to focus on the two qualities of faith that we find in this Morning's Gospel - Salt and light.

Now I wish to say from the outset that it is always a concern of mine that although there is a crucial need to understand the principles of conversion to the faith, there is an equally important element that often is lacking from the modern church: the practical realities of the living faith. That is faith after conversion. In our younger days, Louise and I helped in youth work in the Presbyterian Church. It was great in the sense that it powerfully taught the need for young people to make a commitment of faith, and many of the camps were for this purpose. The trouble was that there was never an emphasis on what comes beyond. Those who made a commitment were never challenged about how that should continue. Now, this wasn't neglected in the sense that there was an emphasis on how to live as a Christian, but this was legislative - By that, I mean expressed in a series of rules and regulations. Christians don't drink, Christians don't smoke, Christians don't...

Now, although this provides immediate guidelines for life, they are static, and the trouble with rules is that there is always the temptation to break them. The problem with boundaries is that there is always the temptation to cross them - Just ask any parent.

It would be wrong to consider that only the Presbyterians are guilty because this is my experience of the Church. Think of some of our churches, like St Johns in Hobart, which has the Ten Commandments carved in stone behind the Altar.

And it would be wrong to say that we did not need these things, especially when we are starting out in the faith, but our legislation can only take us so far. In Jesus' time, there were people with that approach as well. We know them as Pharisees, which is a word that has decided negative tones, but they were earnest people trying to live lives that would please God. And there is little doubt that they were *good people*, even righteous people, but their righteousness was not enough. Now I think it is important to note that Jesus affirms them in this Gospel - For I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says they have righteousness, but not enough. This declaration follows the teaching of how the law is to be fulfilled and not abolished in the further teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (that is where this morning's gospel is from). In those teachings, Jesus expands the law by applying it to the heart. He says - you have heard it said... Do not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. There are a series of these, where the actions are pushed back into attitudes that lead to them.

The Pharisees had got it wrong because they concentrated on the exterior law. And I think that this is where the church has gone wrong over the centuries.

Before I go on, it is worthwhile to remember that there is a certain amount of comfort in a faith that is geared by rules. We can feel comfortable, even superior when we obey all these rules. We can abdicate some of our responsibilities because we allow the decision-making to be done by the legislative process.

Many new churches emphasise this, and in a changing world, they give comfort and security. And they attract young people because of it. They will provide all sorts of advice, from health to raising kids, and although there is truth in what is taught, the understanding of God is more of a disciplining parent than a loving one. One wonderful experience I have had is counselling a youth leader who had fallen pregnant (though unmarried). She had her faith firmly in the structure of right and wrong. It was a wonderful experience because although what she had done was not the way God would have chosen her to follow, we were able to come to an understanding that although she had strayed from God's will, she had not strayed from God's love. Legislation, Rules, and Boundaries are about discipline; our God is about love. He is love.

The two qualities, Salt and Light, will make us Christians. They are what will make us be the people able to enter heaven. So let us consider them.

Salt was an essential commodity in Jesus' day. In the days before refrigeration, salt had that excellent quality of preservation. Salt would stop the meat from going rancid. So valuable was salt that it became currency, and the roman soldiers were paid in it. (the word Salary comes from the Latin root for Salt).

But salt was only sometimes what it seemed. Salt was gathered from salt lakes and the edge of places like the Dead Sea. It often had no purity and was mixed with white clay. Salt that was dissolved left a white substance (the clay), but this had no saltiness and was not able to be used as salt; it had no taste and was only able to be thrown out. Jesus was talking about this: 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 underfoot.

So salt is about preserving, about stopping decay and evil. It is why the candidate was given salt to taste in the ancient baptismal rite after the exorcism. Not only as a reminder that they are the salt of the earth but also that they might be preserved from evil. Think about the superstitions connected with spilling salt.

So as Salt, we are called to preserve the world. Our presence will thwart evil and decay.

Light, on the other hand, is about exposure. One candle will illuminate a room and can be seen and will allow others to see. The Christian who is light to the world will expose the darkness. It is their presence that will reveal the love of God. We will show the things that are wrong by who we are.

I remember the story of a young Christian drafted into the army. As the young men arrived, they put various pictures of women in various states of nudity and poses in their lockers. This disturbed the young Christian, and he didn't know what to say. This young man put up a picture of Jesus. One by one, the other images disappeared till only the picture of Jesus remained.

Our light is our faith, our assurance of God actively involved in the world. We are called to show this to the world. Christianity is not a secret faith, not a personal thing, but something to be shouted from the housetops. Like the city on the hill, we must also be seen as living out our faith.

Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. We have often used these words in the context of the offertory, but this is a disservice to them. There are about living a life that demonstrates the power of God and living it in a way that leaves no doubt as to whom we serve and why we do such things.

As salt and light in our community, we challenge them about faith, about God. Our success or failure as a Ministry Unit is about more than numbers or paying the diocesan commitment. It is about living as salt and light in a community. If we lose our saltiness or hide under a bushel basket, we have failed.

Let us then recommit ourselves to challenge those with whom we live among.

**AMEN**