

6th February 2010 – Wesley Uniting – Epiphany 5 - DT

Theme: “We are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”

Introduction

There is a remarkable scene in the book of Revelation where Jesus is standing and knocking at the door of the church. It has long been used as an evangelistic illustration, focussed on whether the members of the church will accept Jesus or reject him, by either opening the door or not. This interpretation seems to miss an important point. Prior to the scene at the door, the church of Laodicea is rebuked for neither being hot nor cold, but lukewarm in their faith. (Rev 3:16)

This is certainly not a compliment, particularly in reference to living out God’s mission in the world. It would be better for the church to be either hot or cold than to remain lukewarm. This is certainly a perspective that Jesus holds as he teaches in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7.

After presenting eight Beatitudes, that were our Gospel for last Sunday, Jesus begins his sermon by making an analogy that his followers are to be like salt and light. These are interesting choices as both have implications for us today both in the mission of the church and in pastoral ministry.

Salt

To say that we are to be the salt of the earth implies that we are to bring some ‘flavour’ to our relationships with each other. Some-how enrich and add a special quality with those with whom we mix. That is quite a challenge!! Salt has an edge to it as well as a satisfying taste. However, medically today we are advised to watch our salt intake lest it cause some health issues. Of course this was unknown in Jesus’ time and salt was added to most food to give not only flavour but also to preserve it/cure the meat, fish etc so it would be edible longer. Salt was also used to stimulate thirst.

It is into this, almost dualistic analogy, that we need to think in faith terms for today. Much of the pastoral, practical ministry today has been picked up by the helping professionals such as psychologists, social workers, caseworkers in various areas addressing almost all of the human conditions. As part of my ministry training I have done some social work and psych training so I’m not ‘having a go’ at this area. Rather, it is intriguing to note that today, the clergy and pastoral care workers are often overshadowed by those seen as the ‘professionals’ in this area. One result is that pastoral ministry has become defined almost exclusively as supporting and affirming one another regardless of the situation. I challenge this situation quite openly and sometimes am seen as uncaring by some. However, I believe that Jesus could be affirming of the individual but call for changes in the person’s life. This is the ‘edge’ that the saltiness brings. It is no ‘namby pamby accepting of everything’.

Here are some examples:

- Jesus accepted the rich young ruler but told him to give away his possessions
- Jesus accepted the woman caught in adultery but told her 'to sin no more'
- Jesus accepted Zachaeus and the tax collector himself realised he needed to change and did!

I believe that we have sometimes been 'conned' to lose our edge, our saltiness because of criticism that caring means accepting people wholeheartedly and not expecting or encouraging change where it is required. I don't have all the answers but this throws up a different perspective of what being called to be people of saltiness for Christ's sake means. Acceptance, with boundaries - is this what Christ requires in our loving of others?! Food for thought!

Light

Jesus tells his followers that they are to be 'light to the world' and that this light is not to be hidden, but seen. We often interpret this to mean that we are not to hide our gifts and talents by placing them under a metaphorical bucket. Certainly a common prayer used widely enforces this belief: "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." A great sentiment, however there is another reason for letting your light shine – there is darkness in life both externally and internally.

Jesus encourages his followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. The light is the light of the gospel, drawing people to its warmth and radiance. One Bishop once spoke of the church in these words: "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members". You need to think carefully about that. Maybe I need to repeat it. "The church is the only organization on earth that exists for those who are not its members". Do we agree with that? If we do, while we are called to worship together and build up the body of Christ, we are also called to be a light to those who do not see, who do not understand the Christian faith and try to witness, in a dark world, to the light of Christ. Not an easy task. So often we are so busy upholding the church structure that we fail to look beyond ourselves to the world around us. Our eyes need to be lifted from our feet to see the faces of those around, both in our congregation and in our community.

How many of you have sat outside at night, away from the street lights, and watched the stars? In the bush the stars are wonderful – the longer you sit there the brighter the stars become. Again a beautiful analogy of our calling. Sometimes, we are called to be in those dark places, either personally, spiritually or physically to recognise afresh the brightness of the way of following Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. Sometimes we must go into those dark places, bearing the light of Christ. The light is not given for our personal enjoyment.

Conclusion

Two amazing images of faith – one can lose its edge, its saltiness.

The other can lose its spark, its flame. The world can easily impose the mediocrity of life and faith upon us, taking a path that leads us away from Jesus' teaching.

The challenge is to keep our edge, our saltiness and to allow the light of Christ to shine in and through all we do. Praise be for God's word for us this day. Amen