

Epiphany 5 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 9th February 2014

Theme: 'Salt and light' – ordinary things that can be extra-ordinary

Reading: Matthew 5: 13 – 20 (particularly 13-16) which relates to the dual imagery of 'salt' and 'light'.

Introduction

Last Sunday we began looking at the beginnings of Jesus' teachings in what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount which is found in Matthew chapters 5-7. Specifically we looked at Jesus' sayings to the 'blessed' known as the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1–10. These differed from most traditional Jewish teachings in that it was said by Jesus that God blesses the poor in spirit, those that mourn, those that are meek, those who show mercy, those who are pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted. It is not the strong, proud, mighty, wealthy etc that God blesses but those that seemingly are the strugglers, those often on the fringes of society, those that follow their God with loving passion along with care of others who are the downtrodden. This teaching was primarily to his disciples but there were the crowds gathered listening as well. We need this little bit of background as we come to the passages for today.

Matthew 5: 13-16

Jesus suddenly changes his teaching and addresses it to his listeners, both the disciples and the wider group listening to his teaching.

'YOU are the salt of the earth'

'YOU are the light of the world'

Two simple yet amazing word images, with many implications- so let us look at these.

Salt

In the ancient world salt was a prized preservative – a function all but forgotten today in our modern world of refrigeration with frozen and tinned products, freeze drying and so forth. But here Jesus has the mineral's savoury function and the role it plays in enhancing the taste of food in mind. Also, salt in the ancient world was a particularly precious commodity. A small amount of salt can make all the difference to the flavour of different food. Salt, if added at the right time and the right amount brightens and sharpens other flavours present without overpowering them.

As an aside, our vocabulary includes traces of salt's longstanding influence on human affairs. The word 'salary' derives from the Latin term for a 'soldier's allowance for the purchase of salt'. But the point is that salt enhances other flavours, enlivens other tastes, making the world more savoury, more delicious and more beautiful.

But with this positive picture is also a 'sting in the tail' so to speak, in this word picture – 'But if salt loses its saltiness ...it is not good for anything but to be thrown out...' (vs 13b) The positives and the negatives of the call to being faithful to Jesus.

1. As Christians we can quietly and effectively share our faith without overpowering others. Certainly something to think about.
2. We can, just by sharing a little of our faith, at the right time or the appropriate time, enliven, enhance and contribute to others people's well-being and enliven their lives with the faith that God, through Christ, has given to us.
3. We need to have sensitivity with others, allow relationships to grow, before sharing our faith at opportune times.

I learnt this early in my ministry years. In my first parish I used to visit the Burra Copper Mine on a Friday afternoon and simply talk to people where they worked. I think a few

were a little worried that I'd 'hit them over the head' so to speak, with Biblical quotes or tell them what they didn't wish to hear about their own lives. One of these was Cyril, and he would almost run away when he saw me coming. It was six months or more before I had a chance to talk with him, but in tragic circumstances. His son was killed in a car accident and he asked the funeral director to call me. Mostly he didn't talk to me at that time but accepted my presence and let his wife do the arrangements. Later we did talk both in his home and at the mine. He said he was pleased to have me visit the mine but didn't know what to talk to me about so he would go the other way whenever he saw me. However over the years he became one of my greatest advocates at the mine and would encourage others to talk with me and would chide me gently when I hadn't turned up at the mine on my given day by saying 'Had a holiday, Dave?' which was his way of saying 'Missed you last week'. Cyril never came to church, but his wife started coming and years later I learnt that Edith had become an elder in that congregation. Salt, adding flavour to another's life – part of our calling as Christians.

Light

Some of the symbolism of this picture of light is also lost on our modern society. In Jesus' time, when the sun went down and if it was a cloudy night, then it would be what we call 'pitch black'. No lighting to guide your way what-so-ever. A hillside city may well guide a traveller, giving them direction at night by the light thrown from that town. Likewise a lamp may illuminate a house thereby allowing for a host of activities to occur during the evening. Jesus uses the analogy of the stupidity of putting a basket or a bowl over a burning lamp, as not only is it dangerous and may cause a fire but also it has lost its purpose to light the way not only for yourself but also for others.

1. Here we have the need to be upfront and open about our Christian faith – so others can see it
2. We need to allow people to see what we do and why we do things and live a certain way
3. It is not to bring attention and glory to ourselves but that others may praise 'our Father who is in heaven' – that is our God

Both images, salt and light, come with differing warnings about losing our faith and hence making what we do worthless and about motives for what we do. We, as Christians, are called to do all to bring glory to God through faithfully following Jesus and being his salt to and for others as well as shining light on the right pathways of life for others to see more clearly the significance of our following of Jesus, as our Lord and Saviour.

Conclusion

The two images of salt and light thus highlight the distinctive character and actions of disciples. Salt and light are the disciple's identity and way of life. This salt and light may differ from person to person, but stands out in order to influence and provide orientation for people in the midst of the world we live in.

Edith Wharton wrote:

"There are two ways of spreading light – to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have called us to live the sorts of lives whereby others might see some of your radiant light through us. Help us to share the love we have received from you and enliven, enhance and enrich others by sharing our faith appropriately. Amen.