

5th February 2023 – Morning Service

Salt and Light

Megan Ashmore

Call to Worship

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2) Come, let us worship the God whose light brings hope to a weary world.

StF 346 – Christ is the world's light

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| 1) Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high. | 3) Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father.
Glory to God on high. |
| 2) Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high. | 4) Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
Give God the glory, God with us my brother:
Glory to God on high. |

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Prayers

Glory to God on high! Father God, we come. We come to worship you through music. We come to worship you through words in prayer and readings. We come to worship you through unspoken thoughts and desires. We come to worship you through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Jesus, we come. We come to honour you; to glorify you; to praise you. We come to seek you; to learn more about you; to invite you into our lives. We come to ask for forgiveness; to ask for healing; to ask for restoration. We come to ask in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit, we come. We come because you have nudged us. We come because you have led us. We come because you have promised to be with us.

God the Father; God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we come. We come to give thanks for all that we are and all that we have. We come to give thanks for the love of God, the obedience of Christ and the counsel of the Holy Spirit. We come to give thanks for all that you have done and all that will be accomplished in your name. And so we come to offer our lives to you in service, that your kingdom come, and your will be done. **Amen.**

StF 175 – Light of the world

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| 1) Light of the world, You stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes, let me see.
Beauty that made this heart adore You
Hope of a life spent with You. | 2) King of all days, oh so highly exalted,
Glorious in heaven above,
Humbly You came to the earth You created,
All for love's sake became poor. |
| Ch) <i>So here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that You're my God:
You're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,
Altogether wonderful to me.</i> | Br) <i>And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.</i> |

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Introduction to reading

Our first reading this morning comes from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet chosen by God to speak His words to the Israelites, God's own people, who had turned away from Him. God was not happy with them and told Isaiah to raise his voice like a trumpet and declare to the people their rebellion. Many deeds of the Israelites had offended and upset God, but here the sin that is addressed is their hypocrisy in worship.

Reading: Isaiah 58: 1 - 9

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. "Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: here am I.

Reflection/Confession

God is questioning the faith of the Israelites. We are given the impression that they are paying lip service to God. They are going through the motions of worship, and in particular fasting, but their hearts are not really in it. They are not worshiping in Spirit and truth. And so when they question why God does not respond to their pious actions, God, through the voice of his prophet Isaiah, gives them a powerful answer. One they hardly expected. Instead of praise, they get condemnation. God is not impressed with their rituals when it makes no difference to the way they live. So He sets out clearly the behaviour expected from those who truly love and worship Him. It is a life of compassion and servitude, care and love for all God's children. They are called to share their food; provide clothes and shelter; stand up for those who seek justice; look after each other. I wonder if we need a gentle reminder of that message today – that to worship God means to serve Him every minute of every day; to seek to do His will always, and not just on a Sunday. I have shared the following with you before, but it is worth reminding ourselves of the words of Pope Francis, who, in addressing his congregation during Lent 2017 asked, "Do you want to fast this Lent?" Then

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Powerful words which lead us back to the heart of worship.

Almighty God, When we forget the fast you desire— To do justice, and stand up for the powerless: Lord, have mercy. When we forget the prayer you love— To show compassion, and care for those in need: Lord, have mercy. When we forget the rituals you require— To create relationships of righteousness and peace: Lord have mercy. Compassionate Lord, forgive us, and lead us back to the heart of worship, which is all about you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

StF 501 – Help us O Lord to learn

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| 1) Help us, O Lord, to learn
The truths your word imparts,
To study that your laws may be
Inscribed upon our hearts. | 2) Help us, O Lord, to live
That faith which we proclaim,
That all our thoughts and
words and deeds
May glorify your name. | 3) Help us, O Lord, to teach
The beauty of your ways,
That all who seek may find
the Christ,
And make a life of praise. |
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Reading: Matthew 5: 13 - 20

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon

In just over a week's time it will be Valentine's day. The shops are full of cards and gifts that can be sent or given to remind, reaffirm or state for the first time that the recipient is loved by the sender. For the purposes of this service, and not because I intend to send one, I spent an interesting time looking at the cards and their cheesy slogans. Gone are the days of red roses, blue violets and sweet sugar. One card had a Covid test on the front, with the words "I tested positive for loving you." Another had two olives on it, and yes, you guessed it, the slogan was simply "Olive you." Now that's my sort of card!!

At the start of our reading from Matthew, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks directly to the crowds gathered near him and declares, "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." I can imagine the people sitting up, preening themselves a little and nodding at each other to commend themselves on having their worth recognised. But as Jesus expands on these comments the disciples realise that with such a blessing comes responsibility. Following Jesus, and ultimately seeking to do God's will, means that life will not always be sweet; that it won't always be a bed of roses (or violets for that matter!). So let's unpack these couple of statements and see if we can get a deeper understanding of what Jesus is saying.

"You are the salt of the earth."

What are the properties of salt? Firstly it is a taste. Salt enriches the food to which it is added. As a seasoning, salt enhances the flavour of a dish. It brings out the taste already inherent within the food itself. Secondly, it is a preservative. In preserving methods, salt penetrates food stuff, working within it to keep it fresh.

Thirdly, salt has a healing property. Salt water, saline, is used for cleaning, sterilising and other medicinal purposes. A fourth attribute of salt is its buoyancy; added to water it enables things to float, preventing them from sinking. And finally salt can be used for preventing freezing or thawing frozen ice. So how does this broaden our understanding of what Jesus might require of us? I offer a few suggestions.

As followers of Christ, we are called to add flavour to this world. Paul in his letter to the Galatians reminds us that we are to walk by the Spirit and through its power we will produce fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Kingdom values - which not only treat others fairly and with respect, but which support them and help them to see that they are God's children. We are called to encourage all to be what God intended them to be.

Like the salt that preserves, we are commanded to pass on the news of all that God has done for His people and expected to nurture each other. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 9 we are told, *"Be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."* We are taught to enable others to grow in their relationship with God. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 reads: *"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."* And we should keep alive and fresh the Spirit of God. *Jesus said "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.* (John 7: 37 – 39)

Many of Paul's letters were written to new churches. One such letter is the epistle to the Colossians. Alongside words of encouragement Paul gives the followers further instructions for Holy Living – one in particular resonates with our thoughts today. *"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt."* We studied this passage in an online bible study during lockdown and one of our group wrote this about that phrase: *Our speech should buoy people up, should heal, should be life-enhancing. We should say just enough - not too much, not too little. The message of the good news of the gospel should permeate everything in a positive way - we should be persistent but gentle.* (M. Walters 2020)

"You are the salt of the earth." In that first phrase, Jesus reminds us of our duty to serve God by sharing the good news of His love with others through words and actions. If we don't, we fail Him. As Matthew records it, *"if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."* Seemingly harsh words. But Jesus never said following him would be easy. Right at the outset of his ministry he warned people of the challenges of following him. And we're not expected to go it alone. The Holy Spirit will equip us with all that we need to do God's will and work.

So what of the second phrase and its follow up statement?

"You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

William Barclay in his commentary on this passage suggests that a light is first and foremost something which is meant to be seen, and as such Christianity is something which is meant to be seen. He continues, *"Christianity should not be visible only within the Church. A Christianity whose effects stop at the church door is not much use to anyone. It should be even more visible in the ordinary activities of the world. Jesus did not say, "You are the light of the Church"; he said, "You are the light of the world," and in a person's life in the world his Christianity should be evident to all."*

We have a lamp in the corner of our lounge which I sit under to do my knitting. It is operated by Stuart's gadget friend, Alexa. So when it begins to get dark I just say "Alexa, lounge on" and the light comes on. I never look at the lamp; I just enjoy its benefit. However, the other evening, for some reason I moved to the other end of the settee and happened to look up at the lamp. And oh my goodness – the cobwebs that adorned it!!!

Jesus tells the disciples, and of course, us today, that in being called to shine a light for others to see the way to Jesus, we will be illuminating our own lives. What does your light look like? Is it a bit dusty? Is it shining as best it can? "Jesus bids us shine with a pure, clear light." A tough charge to keep; but one which is possible in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

David, in psalm 34, wrote the words, "*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*"

To be salt of the earth and light of the world is to allow others to taste and see God; to reveal Him and lead others into a relationship with Him through Jesus. To live as salt of the earth and light of the world is to live like Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our passage concludes with a warning about the righteousness of the Pharisees. So concerned were they with sticking to their self-imposed strict rules and rituals that they failed to recognise God's Messiah when he came. To be fair they were trying to be faithful to God and behave in accordance with His covenant, but when the new covenant appeared, when the kingdom of God broke through they missed the point. They believed that by following the law to the nth degree they would bring glory to God – keeping themselves pure and holy for Him; when in fact giving glory to God means getting your hands dirty; getting involved with the "muck and mess" of everyday life. The very message God had spoken to the Israelites through Isaiah. "Then your light will shine" he said. "You *are* the salt of the earth. You *are* the light of the world." Jesus doesn't say that we will become these things. As new covenant people we are salt and light now! So let's start shaking that salt around. Let's polish our lamps and get them burning brightly for God.

Let us pray: Jesus, you say that we are the salt of the earth. Sprinkle us across our town, God, across our world, to bring the flavour of your Kingdom wherever we go. Jesus, you say that we are the light of the world. Uncover the radiance that is within us, God, to shine the truth of your love wherever we go. You say that we should let our light shine before others. Empower us through the Holy Spirit to be beacons, that everyone we meet may see our lives of worship and glorify you, our Father in heaven. **Amen.**

StF 161 – Speak O Lord

- 1) Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
To receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
Shape and fashion us in your likeness,
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
All your purposes, for your glory.
- 2) Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
Holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
Let their truth prevail over unbelief.
- 3) Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
Help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
And by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
And the earth is filled with your glory.

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Prayers of Intercession

Lord, we thank you for your church that works in your name to bring light to your people. We ask for a blessing on our ministers, local preachers, worship leaders, stewards and all those who work to serve you day by day. Jesus is the light of the world. A light no darkness can ever put out.

Abba, Father, we are all your children, with brothers and sisters near and far. We pray for the world wide church and all its members joining their voices with ours in prayer and praise this day. Unite us in your love, join us by your spirit and bless us all with your grace and mercy. We pray for our brothers and sisters who have yet to hear the good news of the gospel. May we go where you lead us and speak that which you prompt us to say, so that your love may be shared and more people come to know you as their Lord and Saviour. And we remember our brothers and sisters living this day in fear; those who are persecuted for their faith; those living in countries torn apart by war; and those struggling to survive in places where there is famine and disease. Teach your children how to live in peace and live generously.

Jesus is the light of the world. A light no darkness can ever put out.

Compassionate Lord, we remember all those people who are burdened with cares. We pray for the sick and sorrowing; the misguided and bemused; the lonely and lost. May they trust their way to you Lord, that they might know your peace, comfort and strength. Bless doctors, nurses, carers, counsellors, social workers and charity groups who work to ease the burdens of daily life for these people.

Jesus is the light of the world. A light no darkness can ever put out.

We pray especially for those whose names are on our hearts this morning.

We bring all our prayers to you Father God, in the name of your son, Jesus, who taught us when we pray to say:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 477 – Teach me to dance

*Ch) Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart,
Teach me to move in the pow'r of Your Spirit.
Teach me to walk in the light of Your presence,
Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.
Teach me to love with Your heart of compassion
Teach me to trust in the word of Your promise
Teach me to hope in the day of Your coming
Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.*

- 1) You wrote the rhythm of life,
Created heaven and earth;
In You is joy without measure.
So like a child in Your sight,
I dance to see Your delight
For I was made for Your pleasure, pleasure.
- 2) Let all my movements express
A heart that loves to say 'Yes',
A will that leaps to obey You.
Let all my energy blaze to see the joy in Your face
Let my whole being praise You, praise You.

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Blessing

Let all my movements express a heart that loves to say 'yes', a will that leaps to obey you. Let all my energy blaze to see the joy in your face; let my whole being praise you, praise you.

Accept O Lord, these tokens of our love and with them our lives in service to you, that the light of Christ will be made visible for all to see. And the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. **Amen.**