

St.Alban's Epping, 9th February 2020

“LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE”

(Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2:1-13; Matthew 5:13-20)

“Our Vision is to be a worshipping, recognizably Anglican, Multi-racial, All-age, Gathered, Christian Community – a city on a hill.”

Three years ago, this fifth Sunday after Epiphany was my first Sunday as Acting Rector, when I filled that role for a couple of months between the eras of Ross Weaver and Ross Nicholson. As our Eucharist readings form a three-year cycle, today's readings are the same as those set for my first Sunday. And our Gospel reading includes those familiar words of Jesus about a city on a hill, which we have taken up in our Vision Statement, which I also quoted those years ago.

Over recent weeks, Ross's sermons have been encouraging us to think about how we live and bear witness to our faith not only in church, but **out in the world** around us. And those words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount still have much to say to us.

This famous Sermon begins with the Beatitudes where Jesus describes the characteristics of the genuine Christian. Blessed are the poor in spirit: those who acknowledge their need of God's grace. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek or humble. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for Christ's sake.

Some of these characteristics are inward and personal, but others clearly point to our connection with others and our witness to the world around us. In the first half of today's reading, Jesus is clear about the importance of our openness and our connection to the world about us.

Our Christian faith must certainly be **personal**. It is not just a theoretical belief; it's not simply about going to church. **Yes, our faith must be personal, but it is not to be private.** It **must** touch the way we live, the way we act, the way we speak, the way we treat people, the way we love and serve. It ought to be visible.

As I have been thinking about our Vision Statement, I have also thought about the way Epping has been changing. Not so long ago, the spire of St.Alban's was visible, indeed obvious, as you approached Epping from most directions. Nowadays, it is dwarfed in most directions by the new high-rise buildings going up in our area.

Not so long ago, most residents of Epping would have been able to tell you where St.Alban's is located. I suspect that is no longer the case. A **visible** spiritual city on the hill is less obvious.

But let's remind ourselves of Jesus' words, and remember that he was a young preacher with a small band of followers. No grand buildings for him to rely on! Nevertheless, “You are the salt of the earth”, he says to his followers. “You are the light of the world.”

Salt was used in Jesus' day partly to give extra flavour to food, but especially to preserve it. It would be rubbed on meat to stop it going bad too quickly. Now I understand that salt is actually very stable, and there is no real worry about it losing its flavour over time. I notice that our container of salt at home, which we may well have bought a few years ago, says that its contents have just reached their use-by date: so Sarah and I can check out that theory about salt not losing its flavour! The problem in the days of Jesus was that salt was often gathered from places where there were other substances and powders which looked like salt. So you could use something that looked like salt, but it actually had no flavour, and no ability to stop meat going bad. That substance was useless: once you tasted it, you might well think that it was salt that had lost its flavour. But in any case, all you could do with it was throw it out. It was useless!

Jesus says to his followers – and therefore he says to us - “You are the salt of the earth.” Real salt makes a difference. Real salt stops things going bad. And so Jesus calls on **us** to make a difference – perhaps even in a society which tends in all sorts of ways to be going bad – to be an influence for good. Of course, salt does no good as long as it stays in the saltshaker. Our faith needs to be **seen to make a difference** to our lives – a difference for good. There will be a difference in the way we treat our loved ones, in the way we relate to people, in the way we use our tongue, in the way we serve and care for those who need our help, and in the way we bear witness to our faith in Jesus.

Jesus also says that we are “the light of the world”. Later on in John's Gospel he will describe **himself** as the light of the world, and that might seem a bit strange. He actually uses different words for “light”, and this might help us. I like to compare this difference to the difference between the sun and the moon.

Jesus' light is like that of the sun, which of course is the true source of light for us here on earth. **Our** light is more like that of the moon: we know that we are not the real source of spiritual light. But we are to **reflect** the light of Jesus in our lives, as the moon reflects the light of the sun.

Of course, the value of light has a lot to do with where it is placed. Put a light in a closed cupboard or under a basket, and it's not going to be of much value to anyone. The light needs to be placed somewhere it can be seen, where it will enable people to see what they need to see.

And so Jesus tells us to let our light shine in the presence of others who can be blessed by that light. The light is ultimately not our own light: it is the light of Christ. But it is spread by the good lives we seek to lead, the gracious words we say, the loving things we do, the words of witness that we share. If we truly let our light shine, says Jesus, people will see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

But let's remember that if people see us acting in the right way, showing kindness and helping where there is a need, they may well say, "There's a really nice person". Who then is getting the praise? **We** are: not our Father in heaven. Unless people **know** that we are followers of Christ, they will not praise **God** for those good works of which Jesus speaks.

Mind you, we also don't want people learning of our Christian faith and thinking, "Well if that's what a Christian is like, Christianity has nothing to offer." Our lives must be backed up by our words if people are going to get the message. Our words must be backed up by our lives if people are going to see that there is a real message worth taking seriously.

I am reminded of a number of politicians over the years who have been known as Christians. Some of them have assured people that they won't let their Christian faith control their decisions. I don't know what sort of genuine faith will **not** affect our lives and actions. I hope these politicians simply mean that they won't allow their faith lead them to give unfairly preferential treatment to their churches or to Christian groups, simply because they are Christian. However, if the Christian values of integrity and compassion and right dealing and justice and concern for the needy don't affect their decisions, I wonder what sort of Christianity these people actually follow. Sadly too often I hear Christian politicians speaking and I see some of their decisions, and I wonder: if you are really a Christian, how could you say that, or how could you support such a decision?

But then, I need to keep looking at myself and ask myself how often I say something or do something of which someone could say: "You said that or you did that or you treated someone like that, and you call yourself a Christian!" Letting our light consistently shine is always a challenge.

Of course, as people of faith, we are well aware of our shortcomings. We know that we all depend on God's forgiving grace. Our righteousness is probably not obviously greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, who **were** serious about being good people. **They** fell into the trap of arrogance and judgementalism, and at times hypocrisy. And in the process they pushed people away from the love of God. Sadly there is too much of that around in the church today.

The danger is that we use God's grace in Christ as an excuse for our faults: God will forgive me, no one's perfect, it's not really all that important. But following Christ – and being salt and light – is in fact a full-time occupation!

And if we as individual followers of Christ are called to be salt and light in our home and community and world, our church needs also to have that effect. **Our** light at St.Alban's should be shining. **We** need to be known as a church where people care for each other and for those in need, where people seek to be understanding towards each other, where visitors and newcomers are made welcome without being pushed around. We need to be a church of which people can say: "See how these Christians love one another". We need to be a church of which people can say: "Something real is going on here!" It's a real challenge, isn't it?

Let us then look for ways in which we can move forward in our own lives in truly living as the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. And let us as a community of Christ's people keep praying and seeking ways to indeed fulfil that challenge to be "a city on a hill: a worshipping, recognizably Anglican, Multi-racial, all-age, gathered Christian community", so that we truly bear witness to the light of Christ. Amen.

Paul Weaver

