

Dear friends, this week we see that true disciples witness to the gospel in what they say and do, rather than merely believing it. We have two readings today showing the impossibility of concealing true discipleship from those around us and fulfilling the spirit and purpose of the Law rather than merely its letter. The light of God reveals hypocrisy and shows the way to living out our relationship with him and with our fellow human beings in the world for all to see. With every blessing, Margaret.

Call to worship:

‘Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.’ We are here, Lord, to receive more of your light in our lives, so that we can get to know you better and worship you. Amen.

Imagine a candle shining alone in the darkness. Just one candle doesn’t bring much light.

Now imagine a concert hall filled with many lights. It is a magical effect.

We are here, Lord. Individually we are little candles, but we thank you that together, and with you, we can be so much more. Amen.

‘The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes.’ [Psalm 19: 7-8] Lord, we thank you for your perfect law, and for your Holy Spirit.

We thank you that they work together to bring us closer to you.

We ask you to bring us together now to learn with our minds, experience with our hearts, and to know that we are all one in you. Amen.

The words to ‘Christ’s is the world in which we move’ written by John L. Bell & Graham Maule.

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Songs of Fellowship 685

Christ’s is the world in which we move,
 Christ’s are the folk we’re summoned to love,
 Christ’s is the voice which calls us to care,
 And Christ is the One who calls us here.

Refrain: To the lost Christ shows His face,

To the unloved He gives His embrace:

To those who cry in pain or disgrace,

Christ makes with His friends

A touching place.

2 Feel for the people we most avoid,
 Strange or bereaved or never employed;
 Feel for the women and feel for the men

Who fear that their living is all in vain. *Refrain.....*

3 Feel for the parents who’ve lost their child,

Feel for the women whom men have defiled,

Feel for the baby for whom there’s no breast,

And feel for the weary who find no rest. *Refrain.....*

4 Feel for the lives by life confused,

Riddled with doubt, in loving abused;

Feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin,

Which longs to be pure but fears to begin. *Refrain.....*

Prayer and Lord's Prayer:

For the times when we have not been salt but have failed to reveal your flavour to the world around us - or the times when we have hidden our light, either deliberately or unthinkingly – for the times when we have thought only of ourselves, when our light has been powered by self and not by you, our God – or the times we carry on regardless, despite and through our mistakes - forgive us, good Lord.

You call us to be the salt of the earth, yet we have become tasteless and indistinguishable from the world.

God, forgive us and restore us as the salt of the earth, to add excitement and vision, inclusion and flavour – and to live in every moment, as salt in your world. Amen.

The Lord God hears us and, in his grace, pardons us and helps us to make a fresh start, walking beside us every step of the way. Amen.

Lord, we don't always find it easy to be your salt to those around us. Help us, walk beside us – and help us always to trust that you will show us how to live our lives to glorify you. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and 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.

Isaiah 58: 1-10. Taken from Holy Bible: ERV copyright 2006 by World Bible Translation Centre, Inc. Used by permission,

Shout as loud as you like and don't stop. Shout like a trumpet! Tell the people what they did wrong. Tell the family of Jacob about their sins.

They still come every day to worship me. They act just like they want to learn my ways. They pretend to be a nation that lives right and obeys the commands of their God. They ask me to judge them fairly.

They want their God to be near them.

They say, 'We fast to show honour to you. Why don't you see us? We starve our bodies to show honour to you. Why don't you notice us?'

But the Lord says: 'you do things to please yourselves on those special days of fasting. And you punish your servants, not your own bodies. You are hungry – but not for food. You are hungry for fighting and arguing, not for bread. You are hungry to hit people with your evil hands. This is not the way to fast if you want your prayers to be heard in heaven! Do you think I want to see people punish their bodies on those days of fasting? Do you think I want people to look sad and bow their heads like dead plants? Do you think I want people to wear mourning clothes and sit in ashes to show their sadness? That is what you do on your days of fasting. Do you think this is what the Lord wants?'

'I will tell you the kind of day I want – a day to set people free. I want a day that you take the burdens off others. I want a day when you set troubled people free and you take the burdens from their shoulders. I want you to share your food with the hungry. I want you to find the poor who don't have homes and bring them into your own homes. When you see people who have no clothes, give them your clothes! Don't hide from your relatives when they need help.'

'If you do these things, your light will begin to shine like the light of dawn. Then your wounds will heal. Your "Goodness" will walk in front of you, and the Glory of the Lord will come following behind you.'

Then you will call to the Lord, and he will answer you. You will cry out to him, and he will say, 'Here I am'.

Stop causing trouble and putting burdens on people. Stop accusing people of wrong doing and saying hurtful things. Feel sorry for hungry people and give them food. Help those who are troubled and satisfy their needs. Then your light will shine in the darkness. You will find the bright sunshine at noon.'

Matthew 5: 13-20. [Details as above]

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its taste, it cannot be made salty again. Salt is useless if it loses its salty taste. It will be thrown out where people will just walk on it.

You are the light that shines for the world to see. You are like a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden. People don't hide a lamp under a bowl. They put it on a lampstand. Then the light shines for everyone in the house. In the same way, you should be a light for other people. Live so that they see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus said: 'Don't think that I have come to destroy the Law of Moses or the teaching of the prophets. I have come not to destroy their teachings but to give full meaning to them. I assure you that nothing will disappear from the law until heaven and earth are gone. The law will not lose even the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter until it has all been done.

A person should obey every command in the law – even one that does not seem important. Whoever refuses to obey any command and teaches others not to obey it will be the least important in God's kingdom. But whoever obeys the law and teaches others to obey will be great in God's kingdom. I tell you that you must do better than the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. If you are not more pleasing to God than they are, you will never enter God's kingdom.

Comment:

What is it that we hope for and think we are getting from God? Perhaps we hope for a sense of being at peace with ourselves – maybe just long to know that God is on our side – or perhaps we want the security and protection that the maker of the Universe must surely be able to bestow on us. We might want people to believe that we are good and religious, though that makes God a kind of status symbol for us. Maybe some actually hope to be part of a religious system that is clearly more powerful than any other and can put other people in their proper, subservient place. I suspect that most of us come to God with a mixture of motives – and they aren't all wholly bad, but they are all about us and not about God.

The people to whom Isaiah writes feel most indignant at his round condemnation of their religious practices. Here he is saying that the people seek God and delight in him, and they strictly observe all the fast days, and wear sackcloth, and lie down in the ashes out of their respect for God. Even so, he says that the things they do are not acceptable to God. Whatever else can God be expecting from them? According to Isaiah, the answer is that God expects us to see the world through his eyes, whereas we were rather hoping that he would see it through ours! However well we keep our religious observances, we then turn straight back into our ordinary, non-religious lives, as though the two were quite separate. But God wants us to be heart-broken with love and longing for the world, as he is. Our disciplines of hunger or self-denial are self-chosen and we can do them when it suits us. But there are many who are hungry, poor and not knowing where life will take them, through no choice of their own. We should remember that they and we are all human – all utterly dependent for life itself from the God who made us in his own image. Our destiny lies together, because we are all equally precious to God – and we cannot be satisfied with having just our own needs met.

That is why Jesus says that his disciples are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Their faith is not just – not even primarily – about themselves, but about their participation in God’s work in the world. This is the fulfilment of the law, according to Jesus – for the law is essentially a corporate thing designed to build a people whose life together reflects the nature of God and so makes it more credible to others.

So what is the mysterious and incredible gift which God gives us? It is a gift which allows us to put others before ourselves – to care for the world as he does, so that we are incomplete while others suffer. This gift does little for our own personal comfort or our sense of self-importance. Certainly, it will be ridiculed by those who do not possess it – but it interprets the whole world as God sees it.

[Written after reading from ‘Lectionary Reflections’ by Jane Williams. Copyright Jane Williams 2003, 2004, 2005, 2011]

Prayer: Lord, we think of all the people in this world who seek to share your light, often at great personal cost: those near to us and those far away; those we know and those who are strangers. We think of our ministers, and of all we know who give so much – of their time and of themselves – to help to lead us to you.

We think of our family, friends and colleagues – people in our lives who are special to us and to whom we are special.

We think of those we know who are facing difficult times – illness, unemployment, family problems, and other needs known only to them.

We think of ourselves and pray that we might bring your flavour to the world. We pray that we might touch base with you every day and always be prepared to share you with others.

We pray for others: long may their light shine – and we pray for ourselves and ask that long may our light shine also. Amen.

Lord, for those who are weak, we will seek to be their strength – to those who are defeated, we will offer hope through your victory – to those who are hurting, we commit ourselves to listen – to those who are lost, we will speak of the Shepherd.

For those who are empty, we commit ourselves to love them – with those who have made a mess of their lives, we will seek to be patient – to those who have nothing, we pledge ourselves to share of our plenty – and for those without hope and without love, we will offer Christ. Amen.

Close:

Christ leads us out, back into his world, to live by his word and to reflect his light and love, to be his fragrance in the days ahead. Go with us always and guide us, good Lord. Amen.

May the God who creates the salt so essential to life help us to live in every moment of every day. May the Son who used the metaphor of salt to describe discipleship help us to share the gospel of life. May the Spirit who challenges us to be the salt in the world help us to salt the world with justice and peace. Amen.

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