

SERMON: 9 February 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Being Salt and Light”

(Matthew 5:1-20)

[SLIDE - Judas]. Lord, may our attitudes or character or hearts change as a result of a deep encounter with your Living Word this day; that we might better re-present the Christ, the anointed Presence of God.

[SLIDE]

I'm not sure I've always appreciated the significance of Jesus' sermon on the mount as a provocative statement in direct opposition to the empire of the day.

The Roman Empire, like most powerful empires before it and like most since, ran on fear, scarcity and violence.

Just look at how the Trump administration runs things. A lot of it is based on fear, having to arm itself against all these enemies out there somewhere; spending billions on defence. I'm sure God hates nuclear weapons. God hates precision guided bombs. God hates the billions and billions spent on arms whilst so many people can't get access to clean water. God hates the innocent lives lost to these arms, in Yemen, in Syria ...

Let's hope and pray that our own government will not be run on fear, scarcity and violence. And if we need to let's be ready to hold our politicians to account by reminding them of the necessity of [SLIDE] truth, compassion, integrity and justice - the words engraved on the Mace of the Scottish Parliament.

In contrast then, to worldly empires, Jesus sets out the manifesto of the kingdom of God, based on faith, abundance, sharing and non violence.

[SLIDE]

Rather than smite enemies, enemies are to be forgiven and loved.

Rather than despise the poor, the poor are to be favoured.

Jesus makes it clear that what God approves of is poverty of spirit, the gentle and lowly, those who comfort mourners, those who hunger for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace makers.

Jesus knows that when people live out his manifesto that they might well be mocked, persecuted and falsely accused, because they are his followers. They might not even win a lot of votes. Their politics might not be popular but populism is not the point.

There is something deep down which convicts and convinces people to follow the Way of Christ. It's what we've come to know as the Resurrection Power of Christ at work through all of life, in every living being; even though in many it may yet be a dormant power, waiting to rise up, be awakened, eyes opened, ears unblocked.

The Spirit of Christ empowers and inspires people to live like Jesus. That's why we are here today.

To celebrate that fact and to have the life power of Christ renewed in our lives, so that we can keep on following in the Way of Christ, with hearts transformed, attitudes changed and character more and more resembling Christ who is love.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to live any other way.

[SLIDE] As Willie Barclay said, "Christ still needs his witnesses; he needs those who are prepared, not so much to die for him, as to live for him" (118).

I love the fact that Jesus called the people who came to listen to him the salt of the earth. That was a huge compliment.

Salt was highly valued in the ancient world. The Greeks called salt *theion*, which means *divine*. It was a precious material and often used in economic

transactions, hence the phrase worth their weight in salt, describing how salt was often used as a payment for goods and services.

So when Jesus says you are the salt of the earth he's saying the people around him are precious, as in all people are precious because all people bear something of the Divine image.

And notice that Jesus says you are the salt of the earth full stop. He doesn't say you are the salt of the earth IF you follow me, or IF you do good to your neighbour, or IF ... you can fill in the blank.

You are the salt of the earth is a statement of fact. It's what you are, he says. Without any condition. It's who you are. It's your DNA because Christ says so and all things are made through Christ.

all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col 1:17).

Jesus is speaking truth when he tells people how precious they are.

As well as being precious, salt also suggests ...

- Purity - in the ancient world salt was seen as a pure product of sun sea and so Christians are to be examples of purity; to live with an integrity, and honesty, as much as we can
- Preservative - salt preserves food and stops it from going bad - Christians must have what Barclay called "a certain antiseptic influence on life" (120); and the Christ life we have inside us is there to stop us from going bad, and to help stop others from going bad too
- Adds flavour - to life. Jesus added flavour to an otherwise bland religion based on rule keeping. Christians are called to do the same, bringing love and compassion and justice into all things.

According to Barclay this has not always been the case. Too often Christians have not added flavour to life but have taken the flavour out of life.

Here's what he says, "In a worried world, the Christian should be the only man who remains serene. In a depressed world, the Christian should be the only man who remains full of the joy of life. There should be a sheer sparkle about the Christian but too often he dresses like a mourner at a funeral, and talks like a spectre at a feast. [SLIDE] Wherever he is, if he is to be the salt of the earth, the Christian must be the diffuser of joy" (121).

Sometimes Willie Barclay makes me feel like I'm not good enough as I am and I have to do more. I don't want to give you that impression.

[SLIDE]

Because Jesus insists, you are the salt of the earth - as you are. He knows, better than me or Willie Barclay or anyone, that our true essence is as bearers of the image of God.

Jesus knows that our true selves are hidden with Christ in God. And he knows that it's our true selves that emerge whenever we turn to Christ and go after God's kingdom, God's way of being in the world.

And yes, the Christ presence may be rejected in a person's life, or despised, ignored, un-noticed, allowed to lie dormant, even dead. But Christ has the power of resurrection and not even death can hold the Christ life back.

And what about the light of the world. It's good how Jesus calls himself the Light of the World in John's Gospel and then here in Matthew calls his followers the light of the world.

It's an echo of God's call in Isaiah to the Lord's Servant to be a light to the gentiles (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6) and Simeon's words to Mary and Joseph when Jesus is presented in the temple soon after his birth (Luke 2:32); and Paul uses the term a light to the gentiles in Acts 13 and 26 as proof that the light of Christ is still shining and reaching out to the ends of the earth.

The light is being carried by followers of Christ, who now reflect the light of Christ into the world.

Lights are meant to be seen. Likewise Christians live in a way so as to be seen.

As Jesus put it, let your good deeds shine for all to see so that everyone will praise your Father in heaven (5:16).

Christians are known by their conduct. Our actions matter. How we treat others is important. How we speak to the people who serve us in the supermarket or the hairdresser matters. People take notice. We're all adverts for Christianity in a way.

We all re-present Christ in our own way.

And just as a light is used as a guide so our lives must make the way clear to others.

As Barclay put it, "the world needs its guiding lights; there are people waiting and longing for a lead to take the stand and to do the thing which they do not dare by themselves" (124).

And let's remember that the point of our good deeds is not so that people would notice us and give us praise but that they might give praise to God the Father in heaven for his love which might just be revealed through our obedience to the Spirit's leading.

Because that is our goal - to have God's love so dissolved in our hearts that we can't help but show love as Christ enables us.

Jesus revealed the love of God as the way to fulfil the Law of Moses and all the words of the Prophets, and to keep the commandments.

It wasn't to abide by a list of rules, which was the trap that the Pharisees continually fell into, but to express the love of God through the frailty of a human life.

Jesus shows what's possible. The Christ life is now ours to live. And Christ is salt and light, and is our Centre and our life.

So perhaps our prayer to finish might be to ask ourselves, where is Christ moving us to be salt and light this week? Where can we add flavour to a relationship or bring light to a situation?

And if we feel we're lacking, where might we find the salt we need or the light that will make clear a new way of seeing the world through the eyes of Christ?