

Epiphany 5
5/2/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-20

Salt and light

A little while back, having become more pressingly aware that I'm now more than "half-way" through a reasonable life expectancy and that I really ought to begin to pay more attention to matters of exercise and diet, I decided that I'd try a more protein-rich breakfast of baked beans, with the further refinement that it would be beans with no added salt.

Now, the thing about baked beans with no added salt is that they taste like...someone forgot to add the salt.

As it is with baked beans, so it is also with the church: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt loses its saltiness, what use is it to anyone?"

"*You* are the salt of the earth," Jesus tells the disciples, "*You* are the light of the world." These are extraordinarily high estimations of his disciples – and of *us* who follow after them.

Precisely what being salt and light is is constantly debated. A quick glance through the letters to the editor in [this month's Crosslight](#) will reveal the Uniting Church's own utter confusion and thorough-going disagreement about the matter.

A typical reading of what Jesus says here is to moralise his declaration. Here we take his *description* of his followers and turn it into an *imperative*: *be* salty, *be* illuminating. Perhaps this is unavoidable but a common move here is to imagine that to be salty or illuminating is to set a moral example.

The trouble is that it is well proven that Christians are quite capable of being outshone in the moral stakes. This knowledge can lead us on to what seems like a kind of humility: to *deny* that the followers of Jesus are salt and light – something we feel we have to do for Jesus' own sake.

And yet, Jesus is as uncompromising here as elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount. "*You are the salt of the earth*", not "*you could be a kind of salt of the earth*"

By themselves the metaphors of salt and light don't get us very far, with the result that we have to read into them some other content which "feels" like it might correspond to the characteristics Jesus speaks about here.

Can we be more precise about what it is which makes the followers of Jesus distinctive, such that they might indeed be *the* salt, *the* light?

We find a clue in our reading from St Paul this morning: his characterisation of Christian proclamation as a determination to know "only Christ crucified".

An exegetical principle which the Scriptures sometimes use and which is still useful today is to bring together two texts which touch on the same matter and yet describe it quite differently. Thus, Jesus speaks of the distinctiveness of his disciples in terms of salt and light, and St Paul speaks of the distinctiveness of the Christian as “knowing only Christ crucified”.

What drops out of this is a surprising *content* of what it means to be salt and light: *that to know Christ crucified* is to be salt and light.

But how can this work? As Jesus speaks to his disciples in our gospel text, the crucifixion has not yet happened. How can it be that he is telling them that their part as salt and light in the world is that they know him to have been crucified?

This makes no sense historically or chronologically, but the gospels are not historical documents in that way. They are post-Easter documents. The church which writes them and receives them knows that the Jesus who speaks here will be crucified. The *consequence* of this teaching is already known to them, and to us.

But this is not to say that we can generalise the lesson now, that the people who say and do the kinds of things which Jesus said and did might get themselves killed. This is certainly true, and we see plenty of examples of it all over the place.

At the heart of this matter is a truth much more poignant than that. Those whom Jesus addresses here will participate in the tragedy of the crucifixion, contributing to its tragic character. One of them will betray him, and most of the rest will abandon him in fear and finally, despair. This is not the generic truth that the good will likely get crushed; it is the appalling truth in the instance of Jesus that the good is be crushed *by* the “good”.

So Jesus is saying *to those who will betray him and abandon him: you* are the salt of the earth; *you* are the light of the world, you who have seen but not comprehended, you who have looked but not understood.

We are a long way now from a moralistic reading of the text, or the other readings of Christian vocation you’ll find in Crosslight’s letters to the editor.

You, who are likely to betray or abandon God – you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

How does *that* work? It works in that here we meet the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. The church which wrote these texts, which continues to read them and to meet itself and God in them, is the church which knows that it is not in any *measurable* way the salt or the light of the world. The wisdom and strength of what the church confesses are not *recognisable* as wisdom and strengths.

To know Christ crucified is to know our part in the crucifixion. It is to confess that we, too, could probably do that or, more to the point, that there are more than a few little crucifixions going on even now, that we might live and be as we are.

But the knowledge of Christ crucified is not a guilt trip. Jesus *does* name those disciples – *and us* – as the salt and the light. This is because with the knowledge of failure comes the knowledge that our failures are outflanked by God’s unmeasurable grace. This is what we mark each week as we gather around the table. There we receive the sign of the body of God broken *by* God’s people but made by God a breaking *for* us: a revelation of the extent and fullness of forgiveness this God offers.

To borrow from what we heard from Micah last week (Micah 6.8), we live in a world where a little justice is thought to be enough, kindness is thought to be dangerous and humility the way of fools. This is not new, for it was the same sense for right and wrong which imagined crucifying Jesus to be the best outcome all round.

To be salt and light in such a world is to share in its brokenness but, at the same time, to be pointing to, growing into, and embodying for the world the triumph of God over sin and brokenness *on behalf* of the sinful and the broken.

To be the salt and light of the world, then, is to inhabit the strange place between the fully comprehended cry for mercy and the fully felt song of thanksgiving. This is the habitat of a Christian spirituality, a Christian worldliness, until our comprehension is complete, and our thanksgiving is heart-felt.

By the grace of God, may we grow in such understanding and experience, and so as salt and light, to God's glory and to our own richer humanity.
