

Light of the world – Fourth before Lent 2017 (5.2.17)

Is.58:1-12; Matt. 5:13-20

The week started badly. I sat and listened to someone describing what life had been like in their church school. It was a school, a primary school, which took church attendance very seriously. You went to the school, you went to the church. Every so often, you couldn't, of course, and that was fine – or so you might have thought. Not in this school. Here, if you missed church one week, the priest would come into your classroom, point you out, and make you explain – a primary school aged child – why your family hadn't been in church. Not the worst kind of bullying, perhaps, but enough to turn most people off God and his representatives for many years.

Then came Thursday. Many of you, I imagine, will have been horrified to watch the news that night. Horrified to hear the stories of the abuse suffered by boys taken on Christian camps by someone who seemed a wise, upright, gifted spiritual leader, who then proceeded to manipulate them, to bully them, and to strip them and beat them bloody for his own twisted gratification. You'll have heard how one young man, when his cry for help went unheard, tried to take his own life, and of the death in suspicious circumstances of another. You'll have seen so much damage, in so many lives. And you'll have wondered why it is only now, when people knew since 1982, that police are investigating.

And you will know, worst of all, that this is only one of hundreds of similar stories.

You, Jesus said to his church, are the light of the world. You are a city set on a hill. You are the salt of the earth. I tell you, your righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. People will look at you and see what God meant all along, they'll see what the Law and the Prophets were all about. You are the people in whom all the promises will come true. Like Isaiah said, you will be called the repairers of the breach, the restorers of streets to live in, the people who rebuild the ruins of the human race. He said all that to his church.

And bullying priests, and sick perverts whipping children, is what He got.

For me, this is the biggest challenge to the truth of the Gospel there is. Other things cause me difficulty. I worry about how prayer works. I'm not quite sure how much of the Bible I believe really happened. And those are important questions. But I don't think I'll ever actually lose my faith over them. They don't seem first-order, lethal questions. This one does. What if Christianity doesn't actually work? What if being Christian doesn't actually help one become wise, loving, mature, Jesus-like? What if Christians are just as radically broken, messed up, wicked as everyone else— except more dangerously so, because all the darkness can hide behind a veneer of God?

Now It's very easy to answer that glibly: oh yes, of course we're all in the same boat really, we all have the same problems, Christians are no better than anyone else. But actually, that's is not good enough. In the reading today Jesus did not say, it would be nice if you were the light of the world. It would be good if you were the city set on a hill, the great shining example. He said, *you are* these things. Well, if it turns out – as on the whole it does – that actually Christians are not that much different than anyone else, we have a serious problem. Jesus appears to be a seriously poor judge of character, and his promises turn out to be false.

At which point there are three things one could do.

Number one, we could all quit and go home, and admit that Christianity was a nice idea but it just doesn't work.

Number two, we could just try harder. Lots of Matthew's Gospel, like the reading this morning, can be read as saying just that. Let's do a better job, of everything: of praying, of being generous, of protecting children, of loving our enemies, forgiving people, of everything. And there is a lot of wisdom in option two. Being a Christian is seriously hard work. If it doesn't feel like that's sometimes, we're doing it wrong. *Try harder* is good advice.

It's not *very* good advice, though, and that's because it is quite simply exhausting. There is only so much *trying* human beings can do, before they either collapse in a quivering heap or become rather hard and mean-spirited, a bit obsessed about keeping the rules. And, almost invariably, about looking down on and despising those who do not.

And so the third option is the better one. And that is to remember to place what we might call all the 'try harder stuff' in the bigger context of the whole Gospel. Telling people they must try very hard, and be very good, is not in itself a Gospel. It doesn't actually *help you* be good, it doesn't connect what God *did* in Jesus with your moral struggle. 'Try harder' in itself is not and never has been the Gospel.

The Gospel is this. Christianity is indeed about righteousness, about living as God intended, about perfect love for God and neighbour. It is, indeed, in a word, about purity. But not – and this is the Gospel - *your* purity. There is one person whose life was what God meant – one person who was really pure, deep-down pure, pure in the sense that every action, every thought, every fibre of their being rang true. Who loved his Father with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and loved his neighbour as Himself. One person who kept the Law as if it was written on his heart. One person. Jesus. Only Jesus.

And the Gospel is that he took bread, and said: this is my body given for you. Took wine, and said this is my blood, shed for you. Take and eat. Drink this, all of you. In other words, that he died and rose precisely in order to start pouring his life into our lives. To start making *his* character, our character; *his* purity, *our* purity. To freely give, what no amount of our effort could begin to produce.

So when I read these verses, you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are the city set on a hill – I can't read them as saying "you are the people whose moral brilliance is going to astound the world, always and everywhere and obviously vastly superior to everyone else." That would be nice. It has sometimes even been true. It was the Church which stopped pagan Europe freezing its unwanted children to death; it is still the Church which is the biggest single provider of education and healthcare in the developing world. But on the whole, the moral record of the Church is at best deeply ambiguous. And that's why, whatever St. Matthew thought, we can't read those verses that way.

But how about this? You are the salt of the earth *precisely because* you can be radically, openly honest about all the ways in which you fail. You are the light of the world precisely because you do not try to prove yourself, you do not try to look brilliant all the time, because you do not think everything turns on your own performance. You are the city set on a hill, the great, shining example, because you know that in the end you are deeply, deeply broken and you don't try to deny it. You don't try to cover it up. You don't try to compete morally with others, attacking them or defending yourself. You don't give a fig for your ego, and what people think of you. All you care about is holding yourself open and empty before Jesus, and asking Him to pour his life in.

Before I was ordained, there was a wise old priest giving all of us our marching orders, as it were. He went through all the reasons people needed priests – to preach and teach, visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, lead the church, organise things – and then he said this. Always remember, he said, your people's greatest need, is your own personal holiness. Your people's greatest need, is your own personal holiness. Now, whatever you think about priests and the church, what about the world? Maybe the world's greatest need is *not* a bunch of very morally and spiritually impressive people. Maybe it need, rather, *a holy church*. And if that sounds scary, or pretentious, or arrogant, remember what 'holy church' means. It means people who are total failures, and who because of their failure, constantly turn back to Jesus. Constantly hold themselves open, broken, needy, waiting before Him. Who know that in Him alone is the spring of goodness and grace and healing which will make all things new, and who have the faith to wait by that spring through all the failures of their lives.

Maybe *that* is what our world needs most of all. Not achievements, not results, not even good deeds. Maybe what it most needs, is most parched for, is people rooted in the deep springs of God, letting the grace well up. And so maybe as a church, that is what we need to give our attention to most of all. How do we put that kind of spirituality, that kind of prayer, back at the heart of our life together? More of that in the next few weeks. Amen.