

What a strange time we live in. On the one hand they feel like dark times – a rise in hatred, isolationism and racism. Fear of the other and the unknown seems to be at an all-time high – and at a time in history when our collective knowledge, intelligence and access to scientific data is higher than it has ever been.

At a time when the highest number of people globally can read or have access to education, where many have access to health care and social care that our ancestors couldn't even imagine, our media (and to be honest) much of our community spends an inordinate amount of time criticising education and health, and focusing on all that is wrong and broken in our world and society. So often it is the darkness which we focus on.

Now there is a great deal of darkness in our world – there are wars and refugees on a scale that is overwhelming and in many ways scary. We have political leaders who focus on fear and darkness, rather than looking for solutions or even strategies that might be collaborative and visionary.

It feels at one level that despair has overtaken us – and yet we are not the first generation to long for change or even long for some hope. For humanity, part of our way of processing the world, is to lament?

As I have mentioned in the past, in some of the ancient catechisms of the church, to despair was seen as a great sin – for to despair was to lose sight of God – to lose faith – to believe there is no hope. And yet in the psalms, the ancient prayers of the Church we hear lament – that yearning for God to hear the pain of the people. It is the theme we hear in our reading from Isaiah today – here absence of God is equated to darkness. We hear in verse 3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" The people are desperately seeking justice from God. For these people God responds with their need to bring about justice in a challenge – they cry out for help but continue to oppress others. For Isaiah, those who pour out themselves for the sake of justice and righteousness need not fear darkness or abandonment. It is to them the light of God's salvation will shine.

Some of us may wonder, is the same thing happening to our generation? I doubt it – for one we live under a new covenant – one which Isaiah points to – we live within the knowledge that God brings light not darkness.

Secondly, the theology and doctrine of the church points us to understand that Jesus came that no other sacrifice is required – rather we have a responsibility as heirs of the kingdom to bring about changes on earth. This does not dismiss the need to be praying or seeking God in situations of crisis. But it does mean that as a whole community we need to take responsibility for the way that each of our lives affects the earth.

Is there consolation within this, or are we denying the power of God? To answer these questions I want us to turn to our gospel reading today. The

passage which we have heard comes from what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount – the single longest group of teachings Jesus offered those who followed him. Whether this teaching took place at a single event or to same crowd – doesn't really matter. Rather what does matter is that the gospel writers saw this teaching as the central doctrine of Jesus messages as the messiah. Today those listening to this message are told that they are the salt of the earth. This might seem like a strange comparison for us who are told to avoid salt – but we have to understand the power that salt had in Jesus culture and in many ways still has today. Salt is essential to life as it allows for the proper function of the human body along with the other life forms on earth. We think of salt as a seasoning, but it also serves as a preservative and disinfectant. Salt is a common substance, and in Jesus' day it was highly valued, even serving as a unit of exchange.

Salt, like water, is both common and essential, and they can both purify. Jesus goes on to repeat his point by using the example of light. The message which both Jesus and Isaiah can convey is an understanding that to practice righteousness (that is integrity) is to restore the beauty in community.

The key phrase in Jesus message however is the use of the present tense – Jesus is not saying that these things will happen in the future – that the community will be cleansed or that people will be of value; rather he is saying that these things are taking place now!

Those who follow Jesus don't merely sit back and receive abundant life, or simply tell others about what a great abundant life we have. Jesus is talking here about a life that makes a difference for others in the world.

We are the tastiness that adds salt to lives around us. We are light that makes plain the justice way of the kingdom of God. Jesus says we must be tasty and radiant in order to make a difference for God in the world. Neither salt nor light exists for themselves. They only fulfil their purpose when used, poured out.

Jesus says to the crowd – don't hide these things because if salt is not salty or light is hidden they are rendered ineffective. We might not have the concept of a bushel like the crowds in Jesus day – but we will have an understanding of what it means to hide, or to keep things hidden.

I wonder what are the examples in our own lives, both individually and as a community, of things that we keep hidden? When we hide all the good we are doing, when we do not allow ourselves to take affect then our purpose is wasted. The truth is that it is the bushels – the barriers we create - that block out God's light!

We might block out the light of God for others through our lack of confidence, or by compare ourselves with bigger and more vibrant churches, or by believing that we have no power to bring about change. Or maybe we

block out the light by being self-absorbed by the issues in our own lives and community and allow them to limit the light of God for others. We might even have a fantasy of the way we think things should be which limit us for seeing or reflecting what actually is!

The substance of Jesus message is that things are only hidden – the light and salt – if we choose to put them there.

But what does this mean in the face of the pain of our current age? The cries are still to be heard, and helplessness is still expressed. Where is the light in the face of this overwhelming and violent darkness?

Firstly we have a responsibility to respond – to extend compassion, assistance and comfort to those who are hurting. We also have a commission from God to bring about change – to ask questions about why this has happened, to ensure that we change any of our behaviours that might bring about this impact, and to actively pray for all who are affected.

We also have a responsibility to be clear – to reflect the light of Christ and to be a voice that says – this is not God. God did not make this happen – to show the God of Love that would never endorse this kind of hatred.

Jesus message in the verses we have heard today are a vision of hope and fulfilment of what is possible for all disciples. To remind us of what is common and essential. The call to let our light shine still challenges us today – as much as it did for those first disciples; and so we are asked to consider where does the world need salt and light now? And more importantly how might we be light and salt in those situations?

Even in the face of despair God asks us to remember that we are never alone, and to remember to *let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven (Matt 5:16)*.

And in the end our call is to live out the words of our offertory hymn

*Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you.*

*Pray that I might have the grace to, let you be my servant too. Amen.*