

## You are the salt of the earth

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Ps 112:1-9; 1 Cor 2:1-16; Matt. 5:13-20

9<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Many years ago, when the family was still young, we were invited to Sunday lunch. Given that there were six of us, four boys all with good appetites (to say nothing of their father's), this didn't happen very often! A delicious main course was followed by crumble and custard – yum! But the first mouthful of crumble suggested something wasn't quite right, and the second confirmed it. Salt, not sugar - yuk! Huge social embarrassment, followed by much laughter! But the memory sticks in my mind (if not in my throat), because of the amazing power of the salt. Even a little would have made the crumble inedible, and the amount actually used would probably have rendered it imperishable – the preservative power of salt. It's probably the only occasion where we might have wished that the salt had lost its saltiness!

Now you'll see that that story links with Jesus' teaching in our gospel reading, that 'You are the salt of the earth', as He says to His disciples. All well and good, and I do want to come back to that. But this is one of those days when you should pity the poor preacher trying to make some sense of all the readings for the day. A polemic from Isaiah focused on injustice and lack of compassion. A psalm that does at least seem to follow, promising that it will go well with those who do the kinds of things Isaiah has spoken about – giving freely to the poor, and so on. Then Paul in our NT reading, apparently on another planet, talking of the mystery of God, the Spirit, wisdom, having the mind of Christ – how does that link to bringing the homeless poor into your house? And then Jesus, telling His disciples they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (excuse me, Jesus, but I thought you were the light of the world, not us), and then imposing apparently impossible moral demands – that those who break the least of these commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. (Actually, that seems like quite a good deal – I think aiming to be least *in* the kingdom of heaven might do us very nicely given all this!) But quite why those who compiled the lectionary thought that this particular combination of readings would work well together is something of a mystery (to use Paul's term, so that I at least get that in). Or maybe they didn't, and expected the preacher just to pick and choose whatever suited them. But, it's a challenge to try to make sense of them all without contrivance, and I like challenges – in for a penny, in for a euro – so here's one possible way of making sense of all of this.

The polemic in Isaiah is based on God speaking against the nation who are supposed to be His people. And the fundamental charge is that they are hypocrites, that their religion is a sham, and that God finds this, well frankly, nauseating. "How dare you come, day after day, apparently seeking me and delighting to know my ways, even fasting to show how serious you are, when in practice you serve your own interests, oppress your workers, quarrel and fight and do violence against each other, instead of loosing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into your house, and covering the naked? But, if you did these things, then all would be well. You would call on the name of the Lord, and I would answer, you would cry for help and I would say, 'Here I am'".

God's people were supposed to be different, distinctive from those around them, witnessing to God by the quality of their relationships among each other, their compassion for others, and the lack of violence and oppression in their society. In other words, a community that was, in Jesus words, the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And, as we saw briefly earlier, the Psalm backs that up – the community which fears the Lord, delights in his commandments, a people who are gracious and full of compassion, who are generous in lending, order their affairs with justice, and give freely to the poor, shall receive their reward – it will go well with them; they will never be shaken; the righteous will be held in everlasting remembrance, trusting as they do in the Lord.

Well so far, so good. Challenging, but at least it makes sense. But then what about St Paul? Well, in his defence if needs any, he is on another planet simply because of the 'Christ event' that has occurred between our OT readings and the writing of this epistle. And the Christ event is so significant that Paul has to see everything through that 'lens'. "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified". And this is God's mystery, God's wisdom, revealed to us through the Spirit, so that he, Paul, and we potentially, have the mind of Christ. And I guess we would want to say 'yes' to all of that, while, in the context of the OT readings, wondering what on earth the practical implications of all that might be. How might they link?

But I think the key is this. Paul decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ, *and him crucified*. And he comes back to Christ's crucifixion when he says that the "rulers of this age" (which certainly refers to the human authorities including the Jewish and Roman leaders of the time, but might also refer to cosmic forces, the 'principalities and powers' as they were known, that are a dark force behind those human authorities), these rulers of this age had they understood who Christ was, and what He was all about, *would not have crucified Him*. Now that is a very practical outcome – no sham of a trial with false witnesses providing fake evidence, no violence against an innocent victim, no death. And one way of understanding Christ's death (and it is only one way) is that it revealed, and was intended to do away with once and for all, a mechanism by which we scapegoat others, innocent victims, in order to make us feel that we're OK. And if we do stop doing that, stop scapegoating others, then we have to be reconciled with them, regard 'them' as one of 'us', have compassion for them when things go wrong for them, look out for their highest good. In other words, we would be a people who Isaiah and the Psalmist spoke of, a people of justice, of compassion, who bring the humble poor into our houses, and cover the naked, and so on.

And it's having that understanding, that wisdom revealed to us by the Spirit, so that we have this mind of Christ, which ought to prevent us from becoming like the people that Isaiah was criticizing – who had become hypocrites, with their religion as a sham, who had, in Jesus' words lost their saltiness. The Greek word for 'losing saltiness' apparently literally means 'to become foolish', in other words to lose the wisdom which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. But with that wisdom, with that understanding of who Christ is and what He achieved in his crucifixion and, we should add, His vindication in His resurrection, we might just stand a chance of retaining our saltiness, and therefore of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We might just stand a chance of fulfilling all of the law and the prophets, of having a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, as Jesus says, and thereby not having Jesus' words to them – "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (Matt, 23:23 and following) – applied to us.

So, if the readings all hang together like that, what does all that mean in practice? Well, we are not a nation as were the people to whom Isaiah was speaking, a people set aside by God to be His people and to witness to Him to other nations by their way of life. But we are the church, each church set in the midst of its own community, society and nation. We are meant to be, by the quality of our relationships, our compassion for those around us, and our deep concern for justice, the salt that flavours and the light which enables all that is around it to become more fully and intensely what it was created to be. When the church and individual Christians are truly themselves, we can help the world remember and grow into its true identity – as something called into being by and for the love of God. To quote one famous theologian, the Church's "most credible form of witness, and the most effective thing it can do for the outside world, is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith".<sup>1</sup>

And, of course, we can only do that and keep doing that, we can only not lose our saltiness, if we continue to seek, day by day individually and week by week collectively, the God who we have come to know in

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*.

Christ, and to delight in His ways. That's why, even if the society around us doesn't 'get' it, our worship in general and the Eucharist in particular, as the fundamental reminder of Christ's passion and death, is so central to who we are. Without that, we would just become a well-meaning, self-help group. With it, we retain our saltiness, and so can potentially fulfil our mission to the world.

So perhaps the compilers of the lectionary had wisdom on their side. Perhaps these readings do fit together as providing the two sides of one coin (penny or euro). On the one side, we are called to be a community which, by the quality of our relationships, our compassion for those around us, and our deep concern for justice, provides flavour and light to the world. On the other side, we can only do that and keep doing that, if we are a worshipping community, continually seeking to know and love the God who we have come to know in Christ Jesus, and Him crucified.

And, God willing, we might then just become the least in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen