

Let your Light Shine!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 February 2017
A Contemporary Reflection by Ms Helen Boerma
Epiphany 5A

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

I was excited when I heard that this passage from Matthew would be the gospel reading for today.

This was one of the readings my sisters and brothers chose for our mother Lyn's funeral service, almost one year ago. This passage had a context among Lyn's life events, so I am happy to reflect further on these words.

Indeed, Jesus' teaching on salt and light is likely familiar to many of us. Familiarity is a very good thing, but can lead us to overlook what a startling impression Jesus made when he declared to the crowd: "*You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.*"

Let's unpack the metaphors of salt and light.

Salt and light are both highly valued gifts of creation, and necessities of life.

Salt is valued for a number of reasons:

- Salt made possible the development of early civilization - because salt enabled people to preserve food. This freed people from dependence on the seasonal availability of foods, and helped them to survive dry seasons. It also meant that food could be transported and traded over long distances.
- Salt also enhances the flavour of food.
- Salt was so highly valued that it was even used as currency.

I was surprised by the many values placed on salt, the idea that we are "*salt of the earth*" might signify that we are here to preserve and enhance what is good.

Light of course is also precious.

- We depend on light for life.
- We live in the illusion that we control light with the flick of a switch. However, in most of human history and in many places today, this has not been so.
- Light is a common metaphor in the scriptures.

- Our ancestors in faith understood that it was Light that had sparked creation.
- Light is seen to indicate the Divine Presence and a sign of blessing.
- Light also represented the wisdom of God expressed in the Law. In the words of the psalms, *“Your law is a lamp for my feet and a light for my way.”* The Light would give direction.
- The prophets such as Isaiah, and later Jesus spoke during times when they and their people were fearful, distressed and struggling under cruel occupation. In the midst of those sufferings, they announced a vision of Light breaking through the darkness, a message of hope in what life could yet become.

So the words, of Jesus, *“You are the light of the world.... let your light shine”* could be loaded with possibilities for us:

Here are just a few possibilities that come to my mind:

- Allow yourself live generously. Be generous with your life.
- Let yourself express hope
- Allow yourself to find purpose
- Let yourself live with honesty and transparency. For those who need to trust us, we are “an open book”. There are no parts of us hidden as a dark secret. And, we have someone in our lives to whom we can talk about the things that we struggle with, without needing to hide anything.
- It could also mean: allow yourself live with joy and blessing

So when Jesus told the people, *“You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world”*, it was a startling announcement of the goodness and value of human beings.

John Selby Spong put it well I think when he said,

“To give all our focus to what traditional Christianity called sinful, broken, lost, evil, is both inaccurate and psychologically damaging. It is to fail to appreciate the wonderful creation and incredible gift, which is the human mind and what it has achieved, from great works of art, magnificent symphonies, architectural wonders, surgical and medical skills. All of which is really breathtaking.”

Desmond Tutu described our essential nature in this way:

We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.

In these words about salt and light, Jesus does not appear to be making demands as much as he is affirming our value and inviting us into something good. We are invited to step further beyond the boundaries of our fears, and to experience life more fully.

I would like to share with you the value I believe these words held for my mother Lyn.

Lyn suffered in a number of ways during her childhood. She was only 8 when her sister died suddenly. Then only two years later at age 10, she was sent away from her family to boarding school. Rather than provide the nurture she needed, the school seemed cold and oppressive.

After a few years, Lyn's parents responded to her unhappiness and moved her to a different boarding school. Here, thankfully, she found acceptance and friendship, and she flourished. The motto at her new school was, "Let your light shine".

When I reflect on what these words meant for my mother, I imagine that at a time, after she had experienced being most distressed and shamed, she found herself in an environment in which these words told her, "*You have a light that is worth shining. You are part of something bigger. The world needs you, as it needs salt and light.*"

After leaving school, Lyn settled into nursing, which would give her a place in the world. She had discovered purpose in giving.

School communities have a big responsibility to nurture the light in each of our children. While this past week has seen our young people starting or returning to school, we might spare a thought for all children and those among us who teach them.

Returning to the scriptures, we find Jesus had more to say about salt and light:

He said that there are things that can render salt and light ineffective.

- Salt can be diluted, and so lose its saltiness.
- Our light might be covered by something.

So What are the things that cover our light, or the lights of others?

And what dilutes our saltiness?

In many cases, these things are the effects of unjust patterns of domination, such as racism, the subordination of women, the abuse of children, hostility towards people on the basis of their sexual orientation, or their religion, social inequalities, bullying, war, colonisation etc. These patterns serve to maintain the favoured position of certain groups, leaving others marginalised. And, the experience of marginalization is infused with emotions such as fear, anger, shame and guilt.

Our collective Light may also be covered due to our complicity in such injustices.

The story goes that the bushel won't extinguish the flame, but it renders the flame ineffective. We can hear the incredulous tone in Jesus' voice, "*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel!*"

At this point I would like to consider the impact of racism and other injustices on a particular group of people, about whom we are all concerned, those detained on Nauru and Manus Island:

This week their plight has become the subject of a conversation, which has again inaccurately labeled them as illegal, threatening and unwanted. The conversation has been taken to a new level, and is likely plunging these people into further confusion and distress.

Late last year, many of us saw a Four Corners program, which gave a human face to the teachers and children at the Save the Children school in Nauru. We were touched by the children's vibrant and cheeky personalities, while they expressed their enthusiasm for education, their dreams about what they might become and what they might achieve in the future. The school had become a safe and happy place, where, despite all they had suffered, and their continued trauma in detention, these young people could let their lights shine.

However, teachers and children spoke about further traumas faced by these children, and witnessed their terrible loss of hope, and its impact on their physical and mental health, and so their ability to learn.

One teacher said: *I've known students who, over that time, would say: 'I would never do that, no matter how bad this gets I will never, never self-harm.'* And just about every student that has said that to me has self-harmed.

Another teacher witnessed in these terms: *You could see the light drain out of their eyes. You could see them go flat.*

The teachers working in Nauru were subject to a legal requirement that they not speak about the conditions they witnessed. Nevertheless, they felt compelled to take that risk. The children themselves bravely shone the Light, through their voices in the video footage.

As salt or light, human beings enable the world to see or taste things. They draw attention to important things, other than to themselves.

These teachers and children drew attention to the inestimable value of these children, and indeed the value of every human life.

In the aftermath of World War II, most countries agreed to protect refugees, through the 1951 Convention, and through UN agencies such as the UNHCR. Sadly, this vision has broken down.

Currently, there are more than 21 million people worldwide who have been forced to seek sanctuary. But most rich countries are treating refugees as somebody else's problem. While cutting humanitarian budgets, resources are instead spent on detention centres and other measures to close their borders.

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By insisting that the human community is capable of so much better than this, we seek to preserve and even extend the good, to be Salt of the Earth.

It seems to me that we need to do what we can while we are able.

Returning to reflections on my mother's life, I wonder how we might continue to live meaningfully as light, or as salt of the earth in the latter part of our lives.

Three weeks ago, here at Pitt Street, Clare Brockett spoke to this question when she drew on her rich experience, working in aged care, as well as acknowledging the strengths of many in our own Pitt Street community who are making adjustments that come with age.

Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest who writes on this subject. He says:

"There is gravitas in the second half of life, but it is now held up by a much deeper lightness, or "okay-ness". Our mature years are characterized by a kind of bright sadness and a sober happiness...."

"There is still darkness in the second half of life - in fact maybe even more. But there is now a changed capacity to hold it creatively and with less anxiety."

I witnessed my mother Lyn face terrible anxiety as she became aware that her days of living independently, actively and generously were threatened by losses of her ability to walk, to drive and even to think and converse as well as she had enjoyed.

She subsequently moved from her own home, into aged care for four years. I would like to tell you about a day during this time, when some of our extended family travelled to visit Lyn. Lyn had looked forward to it.

We had planned to share lunch in the café located in the home. We had hardly started when, in the warmth of the sun, Lyn fell asleep. With some disappointment, we took her in her wheelchair back to her room. Later the group headed back together see Lyn to say good-bye.

Lyn's sister in law, Barb, who was struggling that day with her speech and walking, commented, *"I'm not doing very well."* Mum seemed to awaken from her apparent drowsiness and asserted herself with authority.

"Barb, we are ALL doing VERY well!"

The next day, when I saw Lyn she reflected on the time together with emotion, *"Life is getting better all the time, don't you think? in terms of family."* So yes, while it seems that getting older presents challenges in terms of one's performance, perhaps there is now a deepening sense of the importance of loving relationship, which is surely the essence of the life or the light of God.

William Shakespeare said, *"How far this little candle throws his beams!"*

Also in the words of Richard Rohr, *"We are passing on the love of God from age to age... We are all sent to advance the very love of God through time and space."*

We are part of this divine flow.

So let's live the tasty, lit-up life!