

The Gospel, not religion

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A — 9 February 2014
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Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 112; 1 Corinthians 2.1-13; Matthew 5.13-20

When I was growing up, what was called religion was about good behaviour and social control. As a result, religion also helped mark out the decent, respectable people, so that they could feel good about themselves, and so it was clear who didn't fit in. Religion has long functioned like this—a plank in our social arrangements. Of course, the great irony is that Jesus himself didn't fit in; he wasn't religious enough, and he had to be got rid of. As St Paul spells it out for us in today's epistle, "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

St Paul attacks the typically self-justifying spirit of religion and all the wise-sounding, windy verbiage that people come up with about it. Paul tells us that a lot of what passes for religious wisdom is actually immature and unspiritual. For Paul, religion isn't about being a superior person—indeed, it's quite the opposite. That low and despised criminal and spreader of sedition, Jesus Christ, was clearly an unworthy religious subject, and to associate with him was clearly most unwise. But this is precisely what Paul does, telling us of his decision "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:21).

Paul rejects the normal business of religion as social glue and as a mark of respectability in favour of something with little obvious social function. It doesn't make normal sense to follow Jesus in his weakness and powerlessness, Paul explains, but then God turns the tables by raising Jesus from the dead and by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Jesus' ongoing movement, the Church. As a result, the weak and despised in the world come to see that God is with them, even if the smart money is still on worldly business as usual. This is not the ageless wisdom of the sages, this Gospel that Paul proclaims. But it is the very project that God undertakes, contrary to our unreconstructed wisdom and to our conventional religious expectations.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah today is also about bad religion, showing us how self-proclaimed Godly people can get it quite wrong. Isaiah is called by God to trumpet out God's assessment of religion as it was being lived in those days: smug, self-congratulatory, piously inward, but ultimately not in tune with God's own heart and with God's own interests. God is in the business of building community and liberating human beings from their burdens, so that a bunch of self-satisfied, inward-looking, religious people risk missing the point entirely.

The God of Israel wants the people of Israel to look after each other, to seek justice and equity, to be humble rather than self-congratulatory and un-self-aware. If they want God's blessings, then it's this new attitude that will unlock those blessings—and if those blessings include prosperity, as our psalm says that they do, then it will be the prosperity that comes with sharing and being generous, rather than a private blessing from God as our reward for being good religious people.

God's blessings, according to our psalm today, do sound a bit like a reward for services rendered, directed to God's special friends. But notice that these blessed ones, with their riches and plenty, are blessed so they in turn can be generous to others: that way the prosperity is shared and the divine goodwill flows in all directions, not just towards the favoured few. In other words, God's blessings are not to be hoarded or boasted about. Their goal is for building up the community, rather than for any individual or class of individuals to aggrandise themselves.

Today's Gospel explains how this new attitude takes root. The Church is called to be salt and light in the world—two things that every household needed in those days: salt to preserve food so it wouldn't spoil, and light to make life together in the household possible and enjoyable. What good is the Church if we forget our calling and lose our saltiness, our luminosity?

Today's gospel goes on to show us how we can get this wrong and lose the plot. This witness to which God calls us requires that you and to undergo a profound transformation in our thinking. We have to be people who see things differently and hence who come to live differently. It's not enough to keep the external rules and to content ourselves that the status quo is being preserved. Jesus in his sermon on the mount points beyond conventional morality and conventional piety to a complete change of heart about who we are and who God is, so that we become people who can fulfil God's expectations from the inside.

If we want to declare ourselves righteous, however, like the scribes and the Pharisees, then today's gospel tells us that we're in for a shock. For us, there has to be an altogether deeper and more searching encounter with God, exposing our pride and self deception, so that we start to become new people with new insides, with new dreams, and of course with new capabilities for doing good, beyond anything that external religion and bourgeois morality can access.

So, friends, the gospel of Jesus Christ carries us beyond the reach of conventional human religiousness and beneath its surface, so that in the company of the shamed and crucified Jesus, beyond the pale of respectability and worldly wisdom, we discover a power from God that lifts our sights and that changes our life from the inside. Today in the Eucharist we pray that by sharing Christ's gift of himself as bread and wine, we may be transformed from the inside to become like Jesus in his death and in his resurrection. Please God, let us be a Church that goes beyond safe, predictable, conventional thinking, and let us not be content until we have become your blessing of salt and light for the world.