

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany 2020

Isaiah 58:1-9a, 1 Corinthians 2:1-13, Matthew 5:13-20

In Isaiah's stinging rebuke of people of Israel are the seeds of the Sermon on the Mount (which is we are now in our gospel reading). So what of us, how do we understand what we do in Temple and Synagogue and in our day Church, in the context of the world around us? '*True piety*' as one writer put it '*is this outward movement, to share our blessings with the world.*' It remains perhaps *the challenge* of this and every Christian community.

The death of Terry Jones, one of the founder members of the comedy troupe 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' has generated a renewed interest in his comedic writing and performance and also his film making. The movie 'Life of Brian' was his first as a director. I think I have appreciated it more in recent times because I have enjoyed the clever insights into the world of first century Palestine. Who can forget the arguments between the People's Front of Judea and the Judean People's Front! Those squabbles between the various Jewish groups we can glimpse in the Gospels and these tensions reached a peak before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, perhaps as Dr Colin Dundon suggested *the event which would spawn the Gospel of Matthew*. One of the most famous lines in The 'Life of Brian' is in the scene at the Sermon on the Mount. A group of folk find themselves at the back of the crowd and are straining to hear Jesus. What did he say...blessed are the cheesemakers? The response? Well it is a classic one in our day as we wrestle with difficult and uncomfortable ideas: *Well, obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products!* Perhaps there is a truth here, do we find ourselves thinking this when dealing with the difficult words of Jesus – *well obviously they are not to be taken literally.* The Beatitudes and much of the Sermon on the Mount fall into that 'difficult' category. We listen to our sacred scriptures week in and week out, are we able to make them live in our time? Are they a blessing and if so can we share it? This is our challenge.

The Youth group met on Friday for the first time this year. We were graced with new members and a thoroughly wonderful evening was had. We began with 'Extreme Frisbee' on the oval, a truly extreme sport for those of us of more advanced years! We returned to the Lamerton Centre where we sang ourselves hoarse! The favourites: 'Siyahumba,' 'Peace like a River', and the perennial 'This little light o' mine!' This little light o' mine I'm gonna let it shine! We then changed pace and spent some time in quiet meditation before we continued our theological musings with CS Lewis to finish. Then supper!

We are still in the early chapters of *Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis. Jesus hasn't yet appeared. The question at the moment is 'how do we know what we ought to do.' Is love, goodness, decency, unselfishness, honesty truthfulness simply in the water or the air that we breathe? Or is it something we learn from our elders? Is it something we learn from the Bible? What Lewis is slowly drawing out of us is that there is a mind, a purpose behind the universe which is intrinsically good, and we, of all the created order have this innate sense of this within us and which in his words '*we find pressing on us.*' It is a deeply philosophical question, this 'how do we know what we ought to do.'

For us as followers of Jesus such thinking should lead us to the cross, the cross that is *impressed* upon us. The Beatitudes are followed, as we heard today by the call to be Salt and Light. Paul's words about the foolishness of the cross are followed up by today's text telling us that such thinking can only be understood by the Spirit of God nested within our own. The teaching of the Beatitudes which is the teaching of the cross is difficult and all too often we say 'it's not to be taken literally' and then we miss the point and our calling to be a blessing.

When we leave this place it is with the weight of the cross pressing on us. When Jesus speaks of the blessing to be found in poverty of spirit, in meekness, purity, in mourning, mercy, purity he is reminding us that the search for blessing in other places, particularly those places that we most readily look for satisfaction, for salvation is fleeting. He is saying be salt and light, be flavour and clarity in a dark and tasteless world, there are blessings where you least expect to find them if you are salt and light.

This is the message of the cross, I can almost hear the cry now – It's foolish idealism, yes it is, but it is our calling. This calling is a sense of something we find pressing on us. The issues of our day, are as much, if not more so issues in which we need to bring to the cross. All is not well and yet we seem to be constantly looking in the wrong places for satisfaction. Economics, the environment, justice the list goes on, these are issues that call for the idealism, some would say the foolishness, of the cross.

The call of Jesus and Paul is a call for wisdom. We can never *know* completely what we ought to do but there is a great tradition that says that the act of self-giving epitomized in the cross is where we need to begin in our search for wisdom, which is the search for God.

Jesus fulfilled the law on the cross and he calls us to follow him. The cross is *the* salt and light that the world needs. The call of Isaiah is to take our crosses from here into the world and be a blessing. To paraphrase Paul it is a remarkable thing that the so called wise in their day crucified Jesus

unwittingly unleashing a light in the world that shines to this day...
This little light o' mine I'm gonna let it shine! Amen.