

Righteous-Justice

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **green cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in “ordinary” time. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

Listen - One In Christ (UnitingWorld)
<https://vimeo.com/673420849>

Gathering

Today we are thinking about the second part of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5 - images of salt and light are placed alongside Isaiah’s words to God’s people about how their fasting is meaningless if they don’t also live peaceably together and care for people in their community who are most vulnerable.



Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Ancient of Days, breathed life into this Land and her Peoples.

From time beyond our reckoning the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation have blessed this place through their care and concern.

We pay our respects to their Elders and Leaders, past and present and emerging, and we pray for the future of their communities.

May we walk gently and respectfully on this Land.

(c) 2017, A.Koh-Butler, This land is God’s land and God’s Spirit dwells here

Call to Worship

To a society that lives in the shadowed recesses of doubt and fear,
God calls us to be light.

To a world where every greed is fed until there is no taste to life,
God calls us to be salt.

In a time when loyalties are discarded as easily as the clothes we wear,
God calls us to be faithful.

Disciples of Christ, come, let us worship.

We pray...
Light of the world,
be our light this day.
Creator of life,
preserve our life this day.
Holy God,
pour out your righteousness on us this day.
Light of the world,
we gather to praise you on this day, with our hearts, song, and minds. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Epiphany 5, 5 February 2023, p.158

Sing - Gather Us In (TIS 474)

So we sing a song of gathering - as new light streams, as the darkness vanishes, so we know the coming of God's kingdom amongst us.

Here in this place new light is streaming,
now is the darkness vanished away,
see, in this space, our fears and our
dreamings,
brought here to you in the light of this day.
Gather us in, the lost and forsaken;
gather us in, the blind and the lame;
call to us now, and we shall awaken,
we shall arise at the sound of our name.

Here we will take of wine and the water,
here we will take the bread of new birth,
here you shall call your sons and your
daughters,
call us anew to be salt of the earth.
Give us to drink the wine of compassion,
give us to eat the bread that is you;
nourish us well and teach us to fashion
lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

We are the young, our lives are a mystery;
we are the old, who yearn for your face;
we have been sung throughout all of
history,
called to be light to the whole human race.
Gather us in, the rich and the haughty,
gather us in, the proud and the strong;
give us a heart so meek and so lowly,
give us the courage to enter the song.

Not in the dark of buildings confining,
not in some heaven light years away,
but here in this space, the new light is
shining,
now is the kingdom, now is the day.
Gather us in, and hold us forever;
gather us in, and make us your own;
gather us in, all peoples together,
fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

© Marty Haugen

Prayer

Light of the World, we celebrate your light that pierces the darkness,
light that brings the world to life,
sunlight that enables plants to create oxygen for us to breathe
sunlight that enables our bodies to make vitamin D to be strong
sunlight that warms our bodies
sunlight that warms the ocean, setting the currents on their course,
sunlight that warms the soil and helps fruit and vegetables to ripen.
Sunlight - too much and we burn;
too little and we tire more easily.
Light that can dazzle our eyes,
light that shows us the way.

Salt of the earth, we celebrate the spice that flavours and preserves,
salt that brings life to the world
too much and our arteries harden and the soil and waters become unproductive,
too little and our organs shut down
Salt that preserves our food and prolongs its goodness
Salt that adds taste and texture to otherwise bland offerings.

You call your disciples to be salt and light and yet...

Confession of an [Australian] Christian, Matthew 5:13-15

How often we are the salt
in the wounds of the earth,
flaunting our prosperity, hoarding it,
and destroying the tastes
of the wind, the ground, the sea,
by the trampling
of those great boots
we call our needs.

Or, with halogen beams
on our out-of-control truck,
we careen up the highest hills
searching the biggest city,
and singing, "this big light of mine
I'm going to make it shine
so no one sees anything else
for miles and miles around."

We have missed the lamp-lighting
in the valley places
where kindness dwells,
not so everyone looks at our light,
but that by our little light
a child reads a book,
an elder feels safe from rustling
outside the window,
or sirens in the streets,
and partners in love
cook potatoes, slice apples,
bake bread with a dash of salt,

so all those who are hungry
may come in and eat.

Maren Tirabassi
<https://www.facebook.com/maren.tirabassi>

God, forgive us.
Light of the world, shine your light on our way.
Preserver of life, spice our living with your love and grace.
And set us once more on the path of productive contributions to the world around us.
Amen.

Sing - How Long? (NCYC 2003)

This song starts as a lament, with the chorus asking God to teach us to keep working, even in when it seems dark, trusting that God's light will break in.

How long must we cry out
'Till justice rolls down like a river?
How long will this night last
And when will we all be together?

*Teach me to do what is right -
work in the darkness, trust in the light,
and may love be the path I walk upon.*

How long will these bombs fall
And bodies get twisted and broken?
How long will these voices
Keep shouting loud insult and slogan?
Teach me to do what is right...

How long ? Will your creatures
Be trampled degraded forever?
How long, must we cry out
'Till justice rolls down like a river?
Teach me to do what is right...

© 2001 Robin Mann

Listening for God's Voice

Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Reading: Matthew 5:13-20

[Jesus continued, teaching:]

¹³ 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴ 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

¹⁷ 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

Let us pray...

God, in the heat of summer, we can taste the salt that seeps from our pores, and the hot summer sun bathes us in light that dazzles off the ocean.

As your Spirit moves within and among us, nudge us ever closer to the ways of your dreaming for us, in Christ's name, we pray, Amen.

I love this passage. One of the greatest privileges in ministry, for me, is when, at the end of the baptism service, we light a candle and give it to the child or adult, and we commission the newly baptised person saying: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see the good things you do and give their thanks to God."

It is my prayer for every single disciple of Jesus - and it was Jesus' prayer for us.

Salt and light - are great images, aren't they?

We like a bit of salt on our chips.

And we know how important it is to have a torch or a candle handy when the power goes out!

But...

Who knows what it is like when we mistake salt for sugar in a recipe?

Or what does it feel like when you rub salt into an open wound?

Or what about when a strong light is shone in your eyes?

None of those things end so well, do they?

Last week, we were thinking about the first part of Matthew 5, the Beatitudes, we call the first 12 verses or so of chapter 5; alongside words from the prophet Micah - to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God - and we were thinking about the kind of character God wants us to grow in ourselves and in each other.

Our readings, today build on that idea and invite us to think some more about our attitude - and the way we lean into the world around us. Jesus uses the familiar images of salt and light, and Isaiah speaks about the practice of fasting - both of them speaking about how if salt loses its essence, or light is hidden, or the fast is undertaken without attention to the needs of people who are most vulnerable, then these things become useless. And both Jesus and Isaiah use the term "righteousness" to describe what is needed.

Righteousness is at the core of the Jewish understanding of what God asks of God's people. And righteousness is known in the keeping of the law.

The account of Jesus' life that is attributed to Matthew, is grounded in that Jewish understanding of who God calls God's people to be; and Jesus, himself, is grounded in the Jewish expression of faith - he is a rabbi, a teacher - so Jesus' teaching here in Matthew 5 that the law remains central and that what is required is even more righteousness (5:20) is unsurprising. For him, keeping the law is key in the outworking of righteous living.

But that's a bit problematic for us...

When Jesus refers to "the law and the prophets", he is referring to the Scriptures at that time held sacred by the Hebrew people - what we often refer to as the Old Testament - which includes all that stuff in Leviticus, some of which doesn't make sense to us today and some of which is even offensive (like punishing a woman who has been sexually assaulted). And while we can set that aside in the light of Jesus' commitment to love and Paul's comments about love over law, Jesus' comments here remain - the law is important and in the pursuit of righteousness, we ought to out-do the scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

And it is difficult for us, when the language of “righteousness” is perhaps a bit fraught for us today - partly because the term is often associated with a pretend piety or a fierceness or self-righteousness. It is even more problematic when we notice that the term “righteousness” in English today seems to now carry a more personal orientation - it is about an individual’s choices and actions.

But the word that Isaiah uses, in Hebrew, the word Jesus uses, recorded for us in Greek, doesn’t carry that same sense of personal orientation - rather, it carries a broader sense that encompasses personal, family and society responsibilities. In fact, the Hebrew word can also be translated as “justice” which for us often carries much more of a sense of how society operates. Rev Dr John Squires, in his blog on Matthew 5, suggests that a better translation for us is “righteous-justice”. That is, God’s call to God’s people is to live lives of righteous-justice - in every element of our lives.¹

Going back to Isaiah then, fasting on its own, may have some personal benefit, it may make you feel better about your spiritual life, but if we are not also caring for those who are most vulnerable - sharing our food with people who are hungry, putting a roof over the heads of the homeless, putting clothes on people who are cold, attending to the systems of our society that keep people silenced or bound - then the fasting is meaningless. And it is only when we stop bickering amongst ourselves or blaming others for our problems (58:9-10), when our whole living matches what we say, that our light shines (58:8).

In a similar way, salt and light can be used inappropriately - but when they are used in the right proportions and in the right way, they bring flavour, healing and hope. Salt in the wrong place can leave a really unpleasant taste in our mouths. Salt rubbed into our wounds really hurts, even if it eventually aids in our healing. But salt used sparingly can enhance the taste, can offer gentle healing (like a swim in the ocean). A light shone in our eyes really hurts and can leave lasting damage. And a light that gradually gains strength with the adjustment of our eyes can reveal things we might otherwise overlook. Our sensor lights in the lane out here - if they remain on all night and shine into people’s bedrooms, that really doesn’t make us good neighbours! But a well-adjusted sensor light, pointing down, out of people’s eyes, and turning off when it is no longer needed, can make the space safe for everyone.

Lastly, while the gospel attributed to John declares Jesus to be the light of the world (John 8:12 and 9:5), Matthew has Jesus declaring us to be salt of the earth and light of the world or light *for* the world. And not in a way that says you might be, or you are becoming salt and light. Jesus is much more direct - *you are* salt and light - so perhaps the question for us is about whether our saltiness is bland or even too overwhelming or in the wrong recipe; or are we offering flavour and healing? And whether our light is blinding our neighbours, or is shining in a way that illuminates and draws them to its warmth and safety?

After our service this morning, we will be holding our annual general meeting.

¹ <https://johntsqires.com/2020/02/06/an-excess-of-righteous-justice-matt-5/>

My prayer is that the discussions we have and the decision we make will embody God's righteous-justice, and that this group of Jesus' disciples will offer flavour and healing and hope to our community.

Let's pray...

God of love and justice,
when we are tired, strengthen us once more;
when we are parched, let rivers of justice flow through us;
when our neighbours are hurting, may we offer healing and hope;
when shadows blur our way, may our light shine so that people will see what we do and give thanks to you.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Be God's (Seasons 9-10)

This song captures Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 in a really creative way.

Where the world is merciless, *be God's mercy.*

Where the world is hopeless, *be God's hope.*

Where there is injustice, *be God's justice.*

Where there is sadness, *be God's joy.*

Where the world is doubting, *be God's faith.*

Where there is ingratitude, *be God's grace.*

Where there is confusion, *be God's truth.*

Where there is weakness, *be God's strength.*

Let your life change the world one person at a time.

Let your life be the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the bread becomes his body, we can be the living sign.

With God's love, change the world with your life.

Where the world is wounded, be God's healing.

Where the world is weeping, be God's song.

Where there is despairing, be God's beauty.

Where the world is crumbling, be God's rock.

Where there is no tenderness, be God's child.

Where there is loneliness, be God's smile.

Where the world is dying, be God's life.

Where there is darkness, be God's light.

Let your life change the world... (x2)

*Words and music: Danielle Rose.
Copyright © 2003, 2005, Danielle Rose*

Prayer for Others (Meredith Yabsley)

Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

We pray now for the world in which we are called to let our light shine;

for the people who will see our good deeds offered in God's love;

and for the church in which the light of the gospel is proclaimed.

Lord, in your mercy: hear our prayer.

Provide faithful voices to preach your good news
and to teach your commandments.
Strengthen the faith of your people through word and sacrament.
Bless the members of our congregation
that they may be salt and light in the world in here and out there.
Be with us as we walk with those who do not yet know you.
Lord, in your mercy: hear our prayer.

Have mercy on all nations, and bless our own land.
We think of the people of Alice Springs. Many of us have been there, love the town and
the people. Be with those who want to help and those who need help to find a way to
bring light into their dark times.
Bring honesty and justice, peace and safety everywhere.
Bless and protect people in work and leisure.
Lord, in your mercy: hear our prayer.

Comfort those who are suffering, downcast or oppressed. We think of those who mourn,
who grieve loss, who struggle to find You in their sorrow. We think of those who have no
starting place, those with no hope, those who see no future.
Lift up those who have fallen and satisfy the needs of the hungry, refugees,
the homeless
Help all who are in any trouble.
Lord, in your mercy: hear our prayer.

(other petitions may be inserted here)

Father, your Son is the light shining in the darkness of our world.
Teach us to love one another as you love us,
so that we may bring salt and light and joy to the world.
Hear our prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

~ adapted from a prayer posted on the LCA Worship Planning Page.

Offering

As we have received, so we consider our response...

*We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our
response. As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money
- either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are
generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently
because we have encountered the living Christ.*

Let us pray...

God, Your grace reaches out to all of us.
You call us to live, here and now, as citizens of heaven,
working together with one heart and mind.
Strengthen us to live in a manner worthy of the Good News we have received,
offering these gifts and, indeed, our lives in service of Your kingdom,
where the last are first, and the first are last,
and there is grace enough for all. Amen.

Adapted from ~ Christine Longhurst, re:Worship
<https://re-worship.blogspot.com/?m=0>

Sending

Sing - We Are Called (AOV2-60)

*We go singing a song I love - if you let it, the melody seems to almost soar.
But more more importantly, it is invitational - come, live in the light!*

Come! Live in the light!
Shine with the joy and the love of the
Lord!
We are called to be light for the
kingdom,
to live in the freedom of the city of God!

*We are called to act with justice,
we are called to love tenderly,
we are called to serve one another;
to walk humbly with God!*

Come! Open your heart!
Show your mercy to all those in fear!
We are called to be hope for the
hopeless
so hatred and blindness will be no
more!

We are called to act...

Sing! Sing a new song!
Sing of that great day when all will be
one!
God will reign, and we'll walk with each
other
as sisters and brothers united in love!
We are called to act...

© 1988 GIA Publications.
Words & Music: David Haas

Sending and Blessing

You *are* salt of the earth.
You *are* light for the world.
So go from this place, to flavour the earth with love;
to preserve life in all its fullness;
to shine light into places of struggle and pain.

And as you do,
may the God who created you energise your being;
may Jesus, our teacher, be the light for your path;
may God's Spirit prompt and nudge you where you need it.
Go in peace, to love and serve our God in the name of Christ. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield
5 February 2023