

Salt and Light

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

In a night of high emotion for the congregation, the Presbytery of Angus agreed the dissolution of Brechin Cathedral the debt-ridden 800-year-old kirk. The decision comes just weeks after the first event was held in the milestone anniversary of the Brechin's oldest building, leading to bitter accusations that members had been "thrown out and left to their own devices" by the move. The cathedral faces crippling debts close to £170,000 and has been at the centre of talks stretching back years aimed at finding a future for the landmark and its congregation. In an unusual move, the Church of Scotland's General Trustees have already approved the sale of the Cathedral manse to pay off the outstanding debt.

In 2018, Angus Presbytery discussions led to a vote in favour of a merger of the Cathedral and another church in Brechin; but the future of the buildings remained the sticking point. A minister at the Presbytery meeting said: "No-one is denying Brechin Cathedral has a wealth of history, and that history can be told." But every avenue has been exhausted in attempts to overcome the desperate financial situation. The presbytery has expressed the view that there is little hope of the cathedral congregation meeting its financial obligations in its 800th anniversary year. The hope remains that the buildings may be transferred to a community group and used a visitor site with occasional worship. An elder speaking on behalf of the cathedral said: "No-one in the rest of Angus has a building with this history and the just haven't picked up the point that the cathedral is Brechin, it is not just a church."

Arbroath minister the Rev. Martin Fair, Moderator-Designate of the 2020 General Assembly told the Presbytery meeting: "The implication is that the older the building, the more important it is. "That would be important if this was a meeting of Historic Scotland or some such body." He said the church was concerned with keeping a "lively, worshipping congregation", which appeared more realistic for a united Brechin congregation without the burden of such an historic building.ⁱ

I quote this sad current case because it points to the situation faced by many churches, not just the Church of Scotland. It's hard when many think that because we have always been there in the past means that we will always be there in the future. This has never been true in history, and it is not true for the church of today. History won't save us, though it may inform us. Beauty won't save us, though it may inspire us. Buildings won't save us, though they may challenge us to think long and hard not simply about what we do, but about who we are, and why God might want us here. Jesus says we are to be salt and light.

This morning's reading from Matthew's gospel is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – a collection of Jesus' sayings probably drawn together over a period of time. With these words Jesus helps His followers, His Church, reflect on what they are and what they might be. They are like a mirror held up to anyone brave enough and faithful enough to look into. "Metaphors of salt and light have considerable pedigrees in the history of faith. Salt appears quite frequently in the Old Testament, while light is a pervasive symbol throughout the world's religions. The effective work of salt, like yeast, is both hidden and out of all proportion to its small size. It works unseen to give taste and to preserve. But it can lose its savour and become useless... remaining salty means being close to the earth, close to the ground and that this work of salting is humble as well as hidden work. Remaining salty, keeping savour depends on the disciple's use of the resource of faith and prayer to remain faithful to the mission of humble service in the world. It is worth noting that Jesus says: "You **are** the salt." Being salt isn't a demand; it is simply a part of being called to be a disciple, something that permeates the follower's whole being.

Light is visible and makes other things visible; more than that it is inseparable from sight, growth and indeed life itself. It is so vital to life that is no accident that the Genesis story says the creation of light was the first of God's actions in the work of Creation...Jesus (makes the surprising claim here that) you and I – very ordinary disciples – are the light of the world. And we would never do anything as silly as to cover up the light! Jesus' injunction to us is to let the light of our actions shine bright in the world."ⁱⁱ

The German reformer Martin Luther said that the church is to be inconveniently visible.

I like putting these two things together. The church is to be salty, giving flavour to the world; and the church is to be inconveniently visible and bright. We have to make a difference, however inconsequential we might feel we are; we have to shine, so that our actions bring light.

This is a hard time for the church. In our world today it would be hard to describe the church as indispensable – especially as indispensable as salt and light. But it is always a hard time for the church. Have we lost our power to bring flavour to the world? Do we hide our light so that we have become invisible?

“Salt has an edge as well as a satisfying taste. It makes come alive what would otherwise be tasteless and bland...Salt can be a preservative...Salt is also used to stimulate thirst.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We live in a world, in education, social work, the Church, where professionals have been greatly influenced by what is called the therapeutic movement...almost exclusively...supporting and affirming one another, regardless of the situation. Support and affirmation have their place...but there are times when the most pastoral response needs to be confrontational Jesus could both be affirming of the individual person and challenge the person’s behaviour.”^{iv} It’s not an either or; but have we focussed too much on the affirming, and not enough on the challenging? Has the Church, not just us but across the country, become too cosy and club-like, catering for us and people like us, and not salty enough to work in a world where we need to stand up, need to speak out, need to earn our place, need to say what we believe about our faith, and why it makes a difference? This is not easy, and it’s not helpful to swing from one extreme to another, but I wonder, and the sad case of Brechin Cathedral may point to something, that if people rely too much on the past, and not even maintaining that well, how can we focus on present needs, and a future that will be just as tough? Too judgemental? Not of others, but it helps us look at ourselves. What is our attitude towards our faith, and our church? Keep it just the way it is? Keep it going long enough to see me out? We no longer have that guarantee. We face yet another existential crisis. The world is asking, Jesus is asking, we should be asking, ‘What are we for?’ What is our purpose? What are our goals? Why are we here? Challenge leads to change, change leads to preservation, preservation leads to purpose, and purpose leads to hopeful action.

Jesus also challenges us to be light. It's not just about making sure we relinquish our shyness and stop hiding our gifts and talents and achievements under a bucket. But there is more to light than that. There is darkness in life, and Jesus encourages His followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. Archbishop William Temple is often quoted as saying, 'The church is the only society on earth that exists for those who are not its members.' In order for the light to be seen, we must be willing to go where the darkness exists, to engage and walk through it so that, in time, the light can overcome it. The light is not given for our own personal enjoyment.^v

What does this mean for the Church, this Church, any Church? Well, might it mean that when we are salt and light for others, we are more likely to be doing and being what Jesus told us to do: To love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves.

Into such a time we are born. In the Church of Scotland hard questions are being asked, and hard answers are being worked out. It's frightening, it's exciting; it's upsetting because things won't remain the same; it's hopeful because things we know no longer work will be transformed as we move into God's future. We live in a time when we are being asked, not by the Church, but by the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ – what, in 2020, are you really for? What are you going to be? What are you going to do? How is that going to make a difference? How will it attract people to give faith a try, or even only give faith the benefit of the doubt, and associate with us, maybe even join us, for the next stage on the journey?

There are times, I confess, when I feel overwhelmed by the burden of that. What is going to happen next? Am I up for it? Are you up for it? But there are also times when I am thrilled by it. Because I see what is already possible, already achieved, already shaping up for the future. Salt and light. Believe in it, and be it!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Courier Report, Thursday 6th February 2020

ⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, 'But I say to you...' pps 63-64

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles James Cook, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, pps 332-334

^{iv} Ibid, p334

^v Ibid, p336