

Morningside

Sermon

10.30am

5/2/23

Making a difference

Psalm 112:1-9; Matthew 5:12-20

You're a Christian? So what? What is the point of being a Christian? "The point of being a Christian, before anything else, is to show that there is a point to our lives. Our lives are pointed towards some ultimate end. Despite all the absurdity and suffering we may endure, meaning has the last word. We may not now be able to tell the story of our lives or of humanity, but our hope is that one day all that we have lived and been will be found to have sense."ⁱ

I wonder if our faith lived out each day we draw breath, is best seen in the way we make sense of why we are alive, and how we are going to make a difference, even a little difference, that makes the world slightly better than when we first came into it. Our faith has to do, however uneasy this religious talk might

make us, with a celebration of trust in Jesus and the firm hope that whatever life throws at us, we will win through in the end. It's like what the late Vaclav Havel, playwright and President of the Czech Republic said: "Hope is not the conviction that everything will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."ⁱⁱ

I suspect that for most of us, making sense of life is found for us when we realise what kind of difference our living is going to make. It doesn't always come easily; it nearly always comes at a cost, but most of us in our lives are making a difference.

Jesus tells us that we are to be like salt and light in the world.

To say that we are salt implies that we are to bring some 'flavour' into life. Our work, our relationships, our attitudes, and actions.

"Salt has an edge as well as a satisfying taste. It makes come alive what would otherwise have been tasteless and bland. In certain circumstances salt can be used as a preservative, keeping

food fresh for an extended period of time. Salt is also used to stimulate thirst. We can begin to see how this image of salt might relate to how (we live our lives of faith).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Does your presence, your presence as a Christian (however good or bad a Christian, you might think you are) bring flavour into any situation? Does your presence as a Christian preserve what is good? Does your presence as a Christian stimulate others to ‘thirst’ for the right things in life and in living?

Being the ‘salt of the earth’ suggests being close to the ground, and that this work of salting is humble as well as hidden work. Being that kind of salt, getting on with things and, in some small way, having a bigger impact than you could ever imagine, is a large part of what it means to be a Christian. It is the call to do what you can, not what you cannot. It’s about making a difference.^{iv}

Jesus tells us that His followers that they are the light of the world and that this light should not be hidden but seen. We are to use the talents we have been given, great and small, to make a difference. Not to be arrogant, not to be shy, but to be faithful and ready to step forward.

Jesus encourages His followers to bring light to a dark and broken world. This is the good news: that there is hope, mercy, warmth, and brightness. As we shine, we are to be attractive. Archbishop William Temple is often quoted as saying, "The church is the only organization 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 the light can overcome it. We go into the dark places carrying the light that is Jesus. That light is not given for our own personal enjoyment.^v

Light is inseparable from sight, growth and indeed life itself. It is so vital that it is no accident that the poetic Genesis story that tries to imagine how the world began says that the creation of light was the first of God's actions in the work of Creation.

The Bible is full of references to God and light. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5); Jesus claims, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) Jesus wants us, His very ordinary followers, to be that same light. Our actions of kindness and love are to shine in the world, so that they, we, might make a difference.^{vi}

Last Christmas some of the Primary School children at South Morningside school made little boxes and cards that we were asked to distribute amongst some of our folks in the congregation. Some were in nursing homes, some had mobility issues, some were on their own, some simply needed something to cheer them up. From the thank you letters received that I

passed on to the children last week, I know what a difference that little act of kindness from the young to the not so young made. And how pleased the children were to get notes of thanks for something that, to be frank, they had forgotten they'd done. What a thing to be told, that someone, somewhere out there, who doesn't know your name, is grateful to you for something that you have said or done that has made a difference.

I spoke recently to a volunteer in a charity we know well in this church. A one-day-a-week commitment allows engagement with people in need and working alongside others who also care. Together, they make a difference.

These are the kinds of things that make faith, through what we say and do, attractive. People should look at us and be puzzled by our astonishing kindness, the social visibility of our faith.

Neither salt nor light is rare. They are the most ordinary of things. They are not precious or costly in terms of monetary

value. Their existence is often overlooked. But they are essential to life. Salt for taste. Light for finding our way. They are good for the world, and their value is found in their usefulness.

Might it be for you that your goal is to be beneficial, useful, life-giving in your world today. This is not always about measurable success, not that there is anything wrong with being part of a successful church that does big things. But if we have lost our true essence as salt, then people stop seeing us as useful for anything. If we have hidden Christ's light in our lives, then we leave the world stumbling in the dark. Salt and light may not be the most glamorous elements in the universe, but they are worth more than silver or gold.

As Christians, salt and light form our identity. They are what helps make a difference in the world. And we *do* make a difference.

Some of you may know this story already. I once heard it told at a series of university graduations and its repetition blunted its point. But bears repeating: "One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?" The boy replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up, and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die." "Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!"

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, "I made a difference for that one."

The starfish story is a poignant reminder that each life you touch matters, even if it's only one. We can make a difference.

Or maybe, looking around wondering what it means to be a Christian in a world today, and not sure if we should do this, or do that, the words of the Dutch priest resonate:

“Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.”

Making a difference. Sometimes it all goes horribly wrong, and how we speak, or what we are thinking in our minds and hearts, or how we are behaving make the wrong kind of difference, in us and in the world.

But there are other times, many other times, when we **are** the salt, we **are** the light, and we cannot but help make a difference for good. This is real. This is what your faith is about, and God’s

kingdom works through you; through the good that you do;
through the truth that you bring.

And that is what makes a difference. Now. Always.

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

Amen

ⁱ Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, p29

ⁱⁱ Quoted *ibid*, p17

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

^{iv} Leith Fisher, *But I say to you*, pps 63-64

^v Cook, pps 334-336

^{vi} Fisher, p64