

Good for anything?

Creator of the eternal realm, our lifeline and our strength, in you is our health and wholeness, sustain us in the face of all that would harm or hurt us and raise us when we fall; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

A Collect for Epiphany 5, Additional Collects, Common Worship, Church of England

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Isaiah 58:1-9; Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

February 5, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 5:13-20

Jesus said, "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.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In 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.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For 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. Therefore, 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. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

None of us can ignore the escalating tensions in our national and global culture, painful and stark divisions that bring us to compare these days with other times in which the world has seemed to be in the grip of destruction.

In our country some have

observed that church attendance has risen in the Episcopal Church – not dramatically as in the days immediately after September 11, 2001 – but noticeably. People seeking, perhaps, community, connection, mutual support, healing.

Perhaps people needing to

hear again, as last week, about being blessed.

Perhaps people needing to hear, they are salt and light, something real in an age that is disempowering in the shadow of burgeoning technology, random and overwhelming violence, a din of meaningless and conflicting communication, an economy that is often dehumanizing.

Perhaps people needing leadership from a source that lies outside and beyond the temporal political leaders.

Perhaps people seeking companionship in meaningful action in the world in which we continue to live and move and have our being.

We hear Jesus saying: “you are the salt of the earth,” and “you are the light of the world.” He doesn’t say “you could be” or “you will be” and he doesn’t say “you a hint of saltiness” or “a glimmer of light.” No, salt and light of the earth, the world – meant to radiate into this whole, real world that God so loves.

And imagine a community of salt and light, how much difference that human aggregate makes for real action, substantive impact on so much that is bedeviling people.

In the reading from Isaiah this morning, we see the prophet revealing God’s expectations for communities of faith, contrasting

confined, narrow religious practices with what God seeks for the world, for the people of God. The people want God to notice their reserved and “appropriately” constrained piety: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

In response, we hear: “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? 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?”

Get out there and be the light of the world, be the salt of the earth, God says.

Yesterday we had the privilege of hosting and I preached at the celebration of life of the indefatigable first mayor of Solvang, Willi Campbell, one of those who set the bar high for community service in our region – Pete Robbins also spoke on the occasion.

Willi had a way of providing people with “guidance” and in a conversation in the months before her death she gave me a book by her childhood pastor in Cleveland, The Rev. John Bruère, who, like Isaiah was a prophet if ever there was one. He served an urban

church in the 1940s through the 1960s – an era of great stress and change:

He wrote, offering an audacious supposition to begin: “Every person is interested in religion, because every person is created by God.

“Whether on the Jericho Road or on the battlefields of the Crimea, or at a slave auction in the town square, there has always been an urgent need for the practical religion of a Good Samaritan, a Florence Nightingale, an Abraham Lincoln – a person who could meet desperate situations because that person believed in a religion that works.

“Your town has its Jericho Road that cries for compassion, its battlefields that plead for mercy, its underprivileged citizens who are your personal concern.”

To be salt and light is to have religion that works, to accept and respond to those God makes our personal concern.

John Bruère also said: “Where the Spirit of God is, there are miracles. Don’t accept anything as it is. Don’t think that it has to be that way. And don’t let us ever accept ourselves as we are and think that we cannot be different.”

Jesus was not a self-satisfied guru offering spiritual gems and insights so people of earth might bow down and worship. Of course

he was beyond politics, he was also beyond puny, conventional religion.

Jesus was imparting his own life to the people of earth, to us so we might be the very presence of God where we are, everywhere we go, all the time.

YOU are the salt of the earth;
YOU are the light of the world.

And this is the message for young Penelope and Henry on this day of their baptism. The baptism of Jesus is not a baptism of complacency; it is a baptism of action, of change, of adaptation, of growth, of self-giving and most of all, of undying compassion for the lost, the least, the left out. The ones Jesus called “blessed.”

At the end of this week I return to Cuernavaca, Mexico with this year’s diocesan pilgrimage group for two weeks of immersion in Mexican culture and Spanish language instruction, shared, as we know, throughout California and here where we live.

Next Sunday, The Rev. Canon Douglas Edwards will return to St. Mark’s. You may recall he is shedding light on human trafficking and the ongoing practice of human slavery – which we could wish, perhaps, only happened in distant lands – but there are no longer distant lands and this scourge is here with us in the US and in California. You will

have an opportunity to sign a pledge as an abolitionist, to shine your own light on those who today are ensnared and who have lost their freedom. I realize Canon Doug's preaching may make some uncomfortable, but it might be worth hearing (listening), especially in comparison to the discomfort to those who are being trafficked, many of them children and youth.

My sabbatical begins in Lent and I'm sure there will be opportunity to explore what it means for me to be salt and light. In the time I am away you will have with you The Rev. Michael Corrigan and The Rev. Paul Collins, both of whom you know well and who know St. Mark's well.

In working with our parish leaders, I am clear that I don't have a lot of interest in everything humming along smoothly (or smoothly-ISH) as when I'm here, but I have an enormous interest in how you and St. Mark's together – with our excellent Wardens and Vestry – are increasingly aware and present as salt of the earth, light of the world for one another and for the world to whom we are given.

In that regard, let those words of Willi Campbell's girlhood pastor ring in your ears: "Where the Spirit of God is, there are miracles. Don't accept anything as it is. Don't think that it has to be

that way. And don't let us ever accept ourselves as we are and think that we cannot be different."

You are – we are salt, we are light – here and in the world and we are meant to have an impact as who we are, what we are by the grace and with the presence and compassion of God.