

Listening for the Light

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

The Revd Dr Doug Gay's first in a series of lectures at St Giles' Cathedral on the state of Scotland's national church was watched by a global online audience last Wednesday. The theologian's analysis of how the Church has evolved since the 1560s attracted a full house within the ancient cathedral as well as hundreds of viewers from as far afield as Australia and Canada. The Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, chairman of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust, said: "Last night Dr Doug Gay laid the foundation upon which he will build in the next two weeks.

"He identified some of the traditions of our Presbyterian culture of which we should be proud but he also pointed to areas of weakness which are in need of review and reform."

None of what he said was new. The pattern of decline in the churches of the western world is well recorded. "Not that long ago the church was at the centre of society. Its leaders enjoyed public admiration. Its opinions were valued at the civic table. Its ethics were lifted up as a guide to appropriate behaviour. Its services were sought after for the edification of young people. All that has changed. Now the Church is rarely mentioned in the news, except when it is shamed by its leaders' bad behaviour. Its voice is silenced, except when extremists are lifted up as examples and caricatures. Its values and services are considered ancillary..."ⁱ

The declining membership, the secular age, the rise of aggressive atheism, it could have been an extremely depressing night. However Doug Gay does not believe that all is lost. And nor do I. "Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief."ⁱⁱ People still see themselves as broadly spiritual, and many still believe in something they call God. In this 21st century, "many young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries" of a society which is quick-fix, short-term and knee-jerk. Atheism and secularism have not met the human aspirations to fullness of life. Doug Gay wondered if here in Scotland, in what is called the post-Christendom period, we may be about to live through a period where, with atheism and secularism feeling like soul-less dead-ends, something else might come to help shape the questions of our times,

if not always give definitive answers. What people now, more than ever, seem to be asking is not just 'what' should I believe, or even 'why' should I believe, but 'how should I believe'?

Which is why Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, some two thousand years after they were spoken, still rattle around the minds and hearts of the seekers after truth. In our reading from Matthew's gospel today Jesus "implies two fundamental questions of life: Who are we? What are we here to do?"ⁱⁱⁱ

When Matthew wrote down these words of Jesus the congregation he was writing to was, all these centuries later, not so very different from what we face today. Matthew lived in a time of theological and social tension following the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans. 1st Century Jews were in conflict about the future of Judaism and what it meant to be Jewish. 21st Century Christians, certainly in Scotland, are also going through a crisis of identity and confidence. We should be asking what does it mean to be disciples of Jesus today? How are we to live?

Cue Jesus.

"You are the salt of the earth." Salt in the ancient world was a prized preservative. Salt was also the symbol of the covenant with God. Salt was used in ancient sacrifices. Salt was used to give flavour and taste. Salt can be used to stimulate thirst. Salt can be used in protest: the Salt March was an act of non-violent civil disobedience in colonial India in 1930. Gandhi led the 24-day march as a direct action campaign of tax resistance and non-violent protest against the British salt monopoly. The Salt March gained worldwide attention which gave impetus to the Indian independence movement.

As an image for faith it is powerful. Grains of salt are incredibly small, they're also incredibly common and on the face of it there is nothing particularly special about ordinary salt. Yet look at what even a little can do, disproportionate to its size or the fact that it is not very rare. Everyone knows the importance of salt. We all have easy access to it. In What if our Christian faith, the way we live, the way we think, the way we speak, and the way we act? Jesus does not say: "You **should** be the salt of the earth." We're not responsible for making ourselves into

something useful, or writing our goals and objectives to encourage measurable outcomes. Jesus says, “You **are** the salt of the earth.” Already. Right now. This is how God has made us. We have a world to flavour with His loving kindness.

Light is the other great image Jesus uses. Jesus tells His followers that they are the light of the world and that this light should not be hidden but seen. Light enables us to see things and is an energy that gives things colour, helps plants to grow, provides solar power for energy; light can be focussed for specific uses, like a laser. Jesus borrows the image from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who saw people of faith as being the ones who bring the presence of light into the world with them. Faith lived out loud: challenging wickedness; bringing freedom; feeding the hungry; housing the poor; clothing the naked. Do these things, Isaiah writes, “Then shall your light break forth like the dawn...” In the living out of that light, God will be present with God’s people. In the time of Isaiah and Jesus, lamps were small, yet in a dark one-room house in Palestine even a small lamp will give light to the whole house. Even the light of a struggling Church, small and dim though it might be, can still illumine someone’s home, someone’s life.

Jesus did not say, “You **will** be the light of the world,” as if to say that God will make this happen in the completion of time. Instead Jesus says, “You **are** the light of the world.” Already. Right now.

Who are we? What are we to do? In these words of Jesus we can listen for the light. And then we must be the light, and the salt, in the world around us. It will take many forms. It will require us to be authentic and unashamed of our Christian faith.

As far back as 1984, the Anglican Communion adopted the Five Marks of Mission:

- *To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
- *To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
- *To respond to human need by loving service*
- *To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation*
- *To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.*

I was reminded of these last week. It seems to me they represent what it means to be salt and light in our world today. Might that inspire our Kirk Session? Might that inspire our Presbytery? Might that inspire our General Assembly, and its councils and committees? Might that inspire you – the salt of the earth, and the light of the world?

Closing his lecture, Doug Gay wondered about the people of Scotland, embarking in increasing numbers upon the cultural experiment of trying to make sense of their lives without religion. The secular view is that people will find other ways to celebrate, to cope with suffering and death, to confront evil and to find meaning in the daily rhythms of life, apart from religion. This, it is averred, will bring greater fullness of life.^{iv} He's not sure that it can, or that it will. Neither am I.

And there is our opportunity. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. What kind of Christians do we need to be to show to the world what fullness of life in Jesus looks like and feels like?

Be salt and light: love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbours as ourselves. This is God's purpose for us. Be the salt of the earth. Be the light of the world.

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

Amen

ⁱ Christine Chakoian, 'Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew' Vol 1 p81

ⁱⁱ Charles Taylor, 'A Secular Age', p727

ⁱⁱⁱ Ronald Allan, 'Feasting on the Word' Year A, Vol 1 p333

^{iv} Doug Gay, Chalmers Lecture February 2017