

Acts 2:42-46

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Ac 2:43 Life among the Believers

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Mt 5:13=16

Mt 5:13 Salt and Light

"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.

^{Mt 5:14} "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

Over the last few weeks of this season of Lent we have taken as a recurring theme the injunction that we find in the Book of the Prophet Micah:

^{Mic 6:8} He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

We have recognized at each stage in our thoughts the requirement to look out from ourselves. A willingness to recognize the poor and marginalized among us, a willingness to stand alongside them, that willingness to stand alongside them extending into a compassion a compassion, to identify not just with them but with their situation. That will have implications in how we run our society, so last week we recognized that this will have implications in our politics, the issues we regard as priorities in our national life.

Tonight we look at what this means for the Church. To ask of ourselves, how do we think we are looked upon by those outside the Church, how do we view ourselves.

In the ancient world the Church was viewed as a very different organization to the society in which it was set, in that Christians refused to see their devotion to Christ as one religious commitment that could be expressed along with a devotion to the local gods. This meant that it was viewed with a mixture of admiration but also suspicion. The Emperor Julian said of the early Christians

‘These godless Galileans feed our poor in addition to their own.’

The writer Aristedes wrote with some bemusement:

‘They do not keep for themselves the goods entrusted to them. They do not covet what belongs to others. They show love to their neighbours They speak gently to those who oppress them, and in this way they make them their friends ... Everyone of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing.’

So even by their detractors, the early Christians were seen as a group who looked beyond themselves. As our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles tells us, they were a community that also had a deep love for one another, sharing resources.

In more recent times, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop William Temple described the Church as:

‘the only organisation in the world that exists for the benefit of those outside its membership.’

The Church is of course a very different organisation to the early years when it was often an underground organisation within the Roman Empire. The institutional Church of our own day does not face the same external pressures of the early Church and that can impact on how we see ourselves, how others see us. Do we see ourselves, do others see us as a sort of holy huddle? We have these wonderful buildings bequeathed to us by previous generations, we have our traditions – does the preservation of our buildings, the preservation of our traditions (which are not bad things in themselves) maybe sometimes divert our attention from our core purpose, to bear witness in word and deed to the Christ we seek to serve.

In our second reading, from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus present his hearers with two models of life and witness, those of light and salt. Light essentially flows out from its source. That in itself is a warning against

any sort of insular, inward looking approach on our part. We are here to shed the light of Christ on the world. Our buildings, our traditions are servants of that core purpose, not its masters.

Salt is there to be mixed. I recall when we began talking of a policy for Youth Work in the Parish, as we recognised the many other organisations that competed for the attention and commitment of our young people, we came to the conclusion we did not want to seek to withdraw our young people from the Yacht Club, the Rugby Club but rather they would take part in the activities of those organisations confident and comfortable in their Christian commitment, that would see their faith as something to be lived out in the world, the world of school, of employment, of recreation rather than in isolation from the world.