

Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's Wimbledon, Sunday 5th February, 2017, 4th before Lent.

At this time of the year some of us may find our New Year resolutions beginning to waver. We can identify with Jesus' example of 'salt' losing its 'saltiness'. The resolutions or, for the more energetic, the exercise regimes that we set ourselves on 1 January may now seem overambitious. On the other hand others may still be keen and raring to face new challenges. For them 'salt' has retained its 'saltiness.'

I do not think that excessive acts of public penitence and fasting, mentioned in our reading from Isaiah, are a problem in today's world. For the act of fasting world, substitute dieting! We do not parade our acts of penitence in public and indeed on Ash Wednesday we may feel embarrassed about walking home with the small cross of ash showing on our foreheads!

We have to ask ourselves how does what we do in our worship in church on a Sunday reflect in our daily living. Has our 'salt', i.e. our very being retained its 'saltiness' and it's worth or has it lost flavour and usefulness.

I'm reminded of a quote I've used before from a book called '*Empowering the Laity*', although the quote applies equally to clergy as well as lay people:

"Mr. Business went to Mass, he never missed a Sunday, Mr. Business went to Hell for what he did on Monday!"

Mr. Business had lost his 'saltiness'.

The Prophet Isaiah was calling the House of Jacob to a different type of righteousness, not just to fulfil the ritual requirements of the Law, but to see the requirements in a new light.

Isaiah was not asking the people to have a 'tick box' mentality but to put the true spirit of their religion into their daily lives. He called them to be righteous about fasting but not to ignore a neighbour in distress; otherwise there's was not true religion. Isaiah gives us example of true religion in practice:

*".... to share your bread with the hungry,
bring the homeless poor into your house,*

when you see the naked to cover them ... etc (Is.58:7)

What a reward they receive when they translate true religion into practical action:

*"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly; (Is.58:8)*

St Paul knew from his own experience as a Pharisee, not to just trust in the rituals of the Mosaic Law. They had led him to persecute Christians, and even to watch the stoning to death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. It was only Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road that transformed his life and whole way of being. Paul put his complete trust in Jesus Christ. He writes to the Corinthians from a position of humility and states that he came to them;

'in weakness and fear and in much trembling.'

Paul was not relying on his own strength and "*plausible words of wisdom*" but was relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. By doing this he hoped that the Corinthians' faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God.

The concept of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit may seem difficult for us to comprehend. We can probably imagine God the creator as we can see works of creation all around us. Jesus as Redeemer and Saviour is easier to comprehend as we see his work in action in the words of the Gospel writers. Some of us may have had our own personal conversion experience like St. Paul. But the Holy Spirit is the energising power that is present with us all the time if only we can plug into it. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that renews our '*salt*' to restore its '*saltiness*'.

Jesus came to bring people a new perspective to life, to re-energise them and to re-energise us and restore our '*saltiness*'. In the words of one of our modern hymns;

'Jesus turned the world upside down'.

Jesus came not to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfil.

As we read the Gospels we see the power of God working in Jesus' life as he transformed people's lives, calling them to repentance, healing the sick, and restoring the outcasts to society.

God calls each one of us by name. He calls each one of us to use the gifts we have been given to serve him in different ways. It may be working in the Night Shelter, giving service in the community in other ways. God may have called us to be the parents of children, what a responsibility that is. Or we may have to care for a close relative. And what a challenge it is to be a Christian in the business world today., r we are older and not so active we are called to the ministry of pray.

Each one of us has to work out how we can put our Christian faith into practice in our daily lives. To ask the question how can we share with others the Love of God that we receive? We do this by focusing on lives on the person of Jesus Christ. This is what St. Paul did, it was through the strength he received through his belief in the Lord Jesus Christ that inspired his life and can inspire ours too.

I know that this coming Lent there will be opportunities for us all to consider what it means to be a Disciple of Christ as the Parish studies Rowan Williams Lent Book '*Being Disciples*'. On the 4th March too there will be opportunities for quietness and prayer at the Quiet Day at St. Matthew's on the theme from '*Wilderness to New Life*'.

Whatever way we put our Christian faith into practice let us remember the words of Jesus from today's Gospel:

'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' (Matt.5: 16). **Amen.**