

Sunday 5th February 2023

Welcome & Notices

Responsive call to worship

Leader: We are here to be light.

All: Prisms for bringing out God's colours.

Leader: We are here to make God public.

All: Bearers of light to the world.

Leader: We are here to shine brightly,

All: Salt to bring out God's flavours

Leader: With our hearts, our minds and our senses...

Let us open up to God.

Prayer of approach and silent preparation

Loving and amazing God
we bring the whole of us to worship You today
knowing that You created us
and know our every thought,
from You we cannot hide.
In coming before You
we experience Your complete freedom
like we are flying on eagle's wings.
We see differently, when we see how You look at us
and we feel taller, we glow,
we know that we are enough for You
and that You are more than enough for us.

Time of silence

Song – Lord the light of your love is shining

Lord, the light of your love is shining,
In the midst of the darkness, shining;
Jesus, light of the world, shine upon us;
Set us free by the truth you now bring us,
Shine on me,
shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine,
Fill this land with the Father's glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze,
Set our hearts on fire.
Flow, river, flow,
Flood the nations with grace and mercy;
Send forth your word,
Lord, and let there be light!*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence,
From the shadows into your radiance;
By the blood I may enter your brightness,
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness.
Shine on me,
shine on me.

As we gaze on your kingly brightness
So our faces display your likeness.
Ever changing from glory to glory,
Mirrored here may our lives tell your story.
Shine on me,
shine on me.

Prayer of thanksgiving & confession

Generous, giving God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus who shows us the way, who challenges us to hear your word and love your laws so that we may delight in you and live a life of abundance.

We are grateful that you have open arms for us to begin today through listening for your Spirit, expecting a change to come.

We thank you for your prophets and your songs and your stories that dance through our minds bringing colour and light and warmth where we might have been lukewarm.

We are grateful that you never abandon us, never forget us, that you are always waiting for us to come to you.

(Pause)

The worship that pleases you is not simply with our words but with our lives and hearts. The worship that pleases you is to bring love and justice where there is conflict, healing and compassion where there is need.

The worship that we offer falls short of your ideal. Forgive us when our lives do not reflect our faith. Give us a heart for all to whom you would lead us and a willingness to serve that your name might be glorified through the love that we show. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Theme introduction

Bowls of plain crisps are passed round for people to take and eat.

Ask people what they think about them. Do they like them? They are very plain, bland, nothing to distinguish them or give them any real interest. What could make them better?

Jesus said that people who follow him should be the salt of the earth. That's a very odd thing to say – that we should be like salt. So what could Jesus have meant? What things is salt used for and what things does it do?

- flavouring food
- preserving food.
- relieving bee stings,
- removing stains,
- cleaning/sanitising chopping boards,
- removing water marks from wood,
- a natural mouthwash,
- speed up healing of cuts and grazes and prevent infections

Bowls of ready-salted crisps are passed round for people to taste. Ask can they taste the difference? Does the salt make the flavour better?

As followers of Jesus we need to show some of the same qualities as salt in how we live our lives - we need to find ways to bring out the best in the people we meet and the places we go, helping people to heal and live pure and clean lives.

The Grace and children leave

Song – All earth was dark until You spoke (Lights to the world)

All earth was dark until you spoke,
then all was light and all was peace.
Yet still, O God, so many wait
to see the flame of love released.

*Light to the world, O Light of man,
kindle in us a mighty flame,
till every heart, consumed by love,
shall rise to praise your holy name.*

In Christ you gave your gift of life
to save us from the depth of night.
O, come and set our spirits free
and draw us to your perfect light.

Where there is fear may we bring joy
and healing to a world in pain.
Lord, build your kingdom through our lives
till Jesus walks this earth again.

O, burn in us that we may burn
with love that triumphs in despair.
And touch our lives with such a fire
that souls may search and find you there.

Offering

Bible readings – Isaiah 58: 1-12 and Matthew 5: 13-20

Song – Longing for light, we wait in darkness (Christ be our light)

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.

Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

Sermon

You might be familiar with the own-brand food range of a particular supermarket which has the strapline 'Taste The Difference'. The marketing and image of these products celebrate each product's authentic ingredients. The supermarket tries to persuade people to choose from this range by encouraging them to believe in the distinctiveness and quality of these items.

Last Sunday, Naomi took us on an exploration of the Beatitudes – Jesus' teaching to his followers at the start of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes set out how we are to live in a different and distinctive way by adopting values and behaviours that may appear to be at odds with the culture and standards of the day – meekness, mercy, purity of heart, seeking peace and so on. In fact the whole of Matthew chapter 5 contains Jesus' teaching on ways of living that will set apart his followers and make them stand out from the rest of society.

And so we come to Jesus' sayings about salt and light in our reading from Matthew chapter 5 this morning, Jesus speaks about how his followers need to behave and be seen as distinctive in order to show God to other people. Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

The images of salt and light illustrate the task of remaking and reshaping the world which is central to being followers of Jesus. Jesus not only talks about his followers being the salt of the earth, he also talks about the fact that salt can lose its distinctive flavour and qualities and serve no useful purpose. This is a clear and direct encouragement to all who follow Jesus to take seriously the work of being the church in the world. The image of light further develops our understanding of the place of the church in the wider world. A city built on a hill can't be hidden - it's purpose and position will make it clearly visible. And it's obviously ridiculous to think about covering over a lamp with a basket - the nature and purpose of the light is to illuminate its surroundings and show the way ahead. Jesus' use of these images connected with salt and light are a clear and powerful illustration of what the church should seek to be and to do in the world.

Jesus then goes on to speak about the place and the role of the Jewish law and the commands given by the prophets to God's people over the ages. Jesus says that whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus makes a connection between us being salt and light and the requirement to keep and follow God's commands.

So what does it mean for God's people – for us – to be salt and light for the world today? How can we live in a distinctive way in order to flavour and illuminate people's lives with God's love and blessings? We can find some answers to this in the passage from the prophet Isaiah which we heard earlier. This part of Isaiah was written to God's people living in Jerusalem following their return from many years of exile in Babylon. The people seem to think they are doing exactly the right things and following the necessary religious practices – including fasting – in order to worship and follow God and to receive God's blessing. But Isaiah brings a very clear message that the people need to live and behave in a very specific way if they are truly to be pleasing and acceptable to God.

Isaiah spells out a series of behaviours – or commands – from God which the people need to carry out if they are truly to live for God and to show God's love in their daily lives. God says to the people:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

These are more than just one-off actions. These are behaviours which will have real consequences and that will restructure and rebuild relationships and society as a whole in line with God's priorities. The way in which we as God's people are to worship and follow Him means a radical daily way of living which not only promotes the needs of others but also means that we will seek to avoid behaviours such as domination, blaming others and self-satisfaction. It is impossible for us to have a full relationship with God unless our relationships with each other are built on justice and generosity.

Isaiah makes clear that the glory and holiness of God is made visible for all to see in this kind of behaviour and worship of God. Notice the words that Isaiah uses to describe the result of living in this way. He says "Then your light will break forth like the dawn."

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
¹⁰ and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

God seeks to work in partnership with us as God's people to bring about God's purpose for a restored world and this requires us to be faithful not only to God but also to the particular and distinctive way of living which God has commanded.

So let's come back to those words of Jesus that we looked at earlier:

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Just in case you feel slightly uncomfortable, this isn't about us showing off and drawing attention to ourselves. Rather, it's about drawing attention to the love and power of God which are visible and at work in the world – through us. And in doing this we bring glory to God and enable others to do the same.

Our faith and faithful living need to be an essential ingredient in the world and to make a clear and distinctive difference – in the way salt does to food and cooking – to enhance and improve all that we come into contact with. In the same way as salt, our faith needs to be vital and essential to life.

If we live in this way, we will surely reflect the goodness of God by means of our lives and actions so that other people will see where God is at work and the real nature and impact of God's goodness and turn to Him in gratitude. In this way we will act as signposts lighting the way to God. Jesus calls for us to live lives of integrity that bring flavour and light to our world.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Song – Colours of day dawn into the mind

Colours of day dawn into the mind,
The sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
And let's give the message to the people we meet.

*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
Open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of His Spirit, let the fruit grow,
Tell the people of Jesus, let His love show.*

Go through the park, on into the town;
The sun still shines on, it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
The people of darkness are needing a friend.

Open your eyes, look into the sky,
The darkness has come, the Son came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
But Jesus is living, His Spirit is near.

Prayers of intercession

We give thanks to you Lord for the light that shines in our lives through Jesus. Fill your church with that light, that it may be a light to light all nations, that we may proclaim your presence and your glory. We pray for all who have dedicated their lives to you, for all who work in your church today. We pray for the growth of the church in our generation.

Light of Christ

scatter the darkness from your world

We pray for the nations who have difficult decisions to make and are not sure which way to turn. We pray for all who strive to bring in justice, to free the oppressed, to share with the hungry, to house the homeless and to care for the poor. We pray for leaders who feel they are working in the dark, for all who cannot find answers to the problems before them.

Light of Christ

scatter the darkness from your world

We pray that the dark places of our hearts and all dark deeds will be done away with. That the darkness may be dispersed from our communities, that greed and violence may be done away with, that our homes may be places of peace and light.

Light of Christ

scatter the darkness from your world

We pray that all who walk in darkness and in the shadow of death may see your light. We remember all who have lost hope, all who have ceased to trust. We pray for all captives, for the hungry and the homeless. We pray for all who are sick and suffering in any way. In a moment of silent prayer we bring to you Lord people in need of your love and peace at this time. May your healing be known to them.

Light of Christ

scatter the darkness from your world

We give thanks that life is eternal. We remember loved ones who have gone before us and are in the fullness of light in your kingdom. We pray that one day we may all walk in that light.

Light of Christ

scatter the darkness from your world

We pray in the name and the power of Jesus. Amen

Song – We are marching in the light of God

We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching in the light of God.

We are marching, marching,
we are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, marching
we are marching in the light of God.

We are living in the love of God...

We are moving in the power of God...

Prayer of dedication and sending

Salt and light,
flavouring and illuminating,
changing the ordinary into the incredible,
you call us to make the difference, Lord.
May we set our sights high,
blazing your light and
sprinkling your love into all of life.

**All: May we reflect the light of God,
May we shine brightly for his Kingdom
May we invite others
To taste God's goodness
And may we know his blessing
Now and always.
Amen**