

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 9th February 2020
1 Cor 2: 1 – 12; Matt 5: 13 - 20

In Fraserburgh, in the North East of Scotland, is the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses. The Museum was created out of the very first lighthouse built in Scotland, the Kinnaird Head Lighthouse, which in its turn was built in 1787 on top of Kinnaird Head Castle.

If you haven't been to the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, you should go. I learned a lot when I went there in October, not just about the history of Scotland's first lighthouse. I also learned that over the course of the past thirty years or so the lamps from Scotland's 202 lighthouses have been replaced so that the lighthouses can operate remotely without the need for a lighthouse keeper. As these lamps have been replaced, the lenses of the old lights have been collected together and put on display at the Museum in Fraserburgh. There, these lights offer a great demonstration of how lighthouses work.

From just one relatively small bulb a light from a lighthouse can send a beam of light miles out to sea, at Kinnaird Head the beam travels 22 nautical miles. Prior to automation the lenses that were used to achieve this were called Fresnel Lenses. Fresnel Lenses work by repeatedly reflecting the light from the small bulb into a main beam, and then magnifying that beam and shining it out into the darkness, to save lives.

There's much more to learn at the museum than that, but it is that process of reflecting, magnifying and shining light that I was thinking about when I read Jesus say in our Gospel reading this morning, 'You are a light for all the world... you must shed light among your fellows...'¹

You are a light for all the world. In the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, it is extremely common to hear Jesus described as the light of the world. But, here in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls his disciples, then and now, them and us, lights for the world. It is a shame that there are no hymns in the hymnbook that reflect this statement. The hymns about light celebrate Jesus or God as light, but there aren't any that celebrate the way that we are light.

That's a shame, because when we are trying to understand what it means to be a disciple, this metaphor about light is very helpful. Whether we are a church of disciples or an individual disciple, we are relatively small in this world, much like the bulb in a lighthouse. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is saying to us, to you, that to be a disciple is to be a light.

Having said that, if you would rather not be a light then you don't have to, you could instead be salt, for not only does Jesus define a disciple as a light, in the gospel of Matthew he also defines a disciple as salt, 'You are salt to the world,'² he says.

Like the small bulb in a lighthouse, salt is also something small. But, despite its size it is something that can have a transformational effect on its surroundings. When light is magnified in the right way it pierces the darkness for many, many miles, and when salt has not lost its taste, as it can, a little can transform the taste of even the largest pizza, bowl of soup, or loaf of bread.

You are light for all the world; you are. You are salt to the world; you are.

¹ Matthew 5: 14 & 16

² Matthew 5:13

But, salt is not much use if it 'becomes tasteless', and a lamp is not much use if it is 'put under a meal-tub'³. We may be light for all the world and salt to the world, but how do we ensure that we shine brightly in the dark and how do we ensure that we savour the taste of the loaf?

That question pressed itself upon Paul in our first reading from the letter to the church in Corinth. He had watched that congregation lose its way in the dark and lose its taste for Jesus Christ. He wrote to give it guidance and to restore its saltiness. He noted, as we have heard here over the past couple of weeks working through this letter, that the congregation there in Corinth had been distracted by the wisdom, cleverness and articulate words of teachers who dazzled with brilliance, but who also distracted the members from their faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul said, 'As for me, brothers, when I came to you, I declared the attested truth of God without display of fine words or wisdom. I resolved that while I was with you I would think of nothing but Jesus Christ – Christ nailed to the cross.'⁴

For Paul, our focus on Jesus Christ, our consuming of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, our belief in his ministry and life, our focus on his crucifixion and his resurrection magnifies the light of God, which is in us, and restores the taste for God that we possess.

For Paul, when we believe in Jesus Christ we are enflamed with a spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit, that reflects, magnifies and shines our faith out into the world. When we taste Jesus Christ in faith, we are savoured by a spirit of holiness, the Holy Spirit and we transform the world around us.

'For the Spirit explores everything, even the depths of God's own nature. Among people, who knows what a person is but the person's own spirit within them? In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows what God is. This is the Spirit that we have received from God, and not the spirit of the world...',⁵ he wrote.

That Spirit is not just enflamed within each of us when we taste and see that the Lord is good in the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection, or when we reflect and magnify our spirit through the lens of Christ, that Spirit is enflamed in us when we join together as a congregation, a church.

When we together taste and see that Lord is good and together reflect and magnify our spirits through the lens of Jesus Christ then the Holy Spirit is enflamed amongst us as a congregation to be salt to the world, and light for all the world.

In Fraserburgh in October the most interesting thing that I learned about lighthouses was not so much about how they work, but rather what lighthouses are for. Do you know what Scottish lighthouses are for? I always assumed I knew what lighthouses were for, after all a beam of light cast over a dark sea must be, in general, a helpful thing for sailors, must it not? That was about as far as I got with my thinking.

However, it turns out that lighthouses exist for a very specific reason. They are not there to light a path, or to guide ships in a particular direction, or even in general to warn of a hazard, they are there to help mariners locate their position.

Each lighthouse's light has a unique, distinctive flash pattern. When out at sea at night, a bright flashing light alone is of limited use to mariners. But, a bright, light that flashes with a

³ Matthew 5: 13 & 14

⁴ 1 Cor 2: 1

⁵ 1 Cor 1: 12

unique pattern is transformational. The pattern indicates which lighthouse you can see, and its compass bearing. With a chart, you can then work out roughly where you are. If you can see two lighthouses, each with their unique flash pattern, you can chart exactly your position in the sea.

What people need to know in this life, like mariners, is where they are. They want to found not lost. Jesus searches for the lost sheep and the lost coin, and rejoices when it is found, as you would if you were lost at sea, at night. I once was lost, but now am found.

You are a disciple of Jesus Christ. You are found. You are a light for all the world. We together are a light for all the world, reflected and magnified by a spirit of holiness, not so that we can show people the way they should go, or warn them of the rocks that lie submerged in this world, but so that by using you and us as beacons they can themselves chart their way across this world's dark and rough seas.

It is a proverb of English, is it not, the phrase, 'the salt of the earth'? So common that people may not even know when they are using it that they are quoting Jesus. Mostly when people do use it, it is misused. Here, for example, is Mick Jagger using it in the Rolling Stones' song of the same name, Salt of the Earth,

'Let's drink to the hard-working people,
Let's drink to the lowly of birth,
Raise your glass to the good and the evil.
Let's drink to the salt of the earth.'⁶

That association of the phrase 'salt of the earth' with the hard working, humble poor, is not what Jesus meant when he used the phrase for the first time. The salt of the earth is not a metaphor that attempts to dignify, through work, people who have a lowly and humble place in a class structure. It is a metaphor for people whose presence in the world, like salt transforms food, transforms the world around them: the class structures in to which they have been born; the purpose and definition of work; their humble status.

The salt of the earth are people, in Jesus' mind, who because of their faith invigorated, savoured, enflamed by a spirit of holiness believe that this world can be turned on its head so that work isn't hard, but purposeful, so that your birth in to this world is never, ever lowly, but, transformed by faith in God, is as significant, meaningful and loved as anyone's birth.

The salt of the earth are also not the majority of the population, they are a very much a minority, but a minority whose presence may not change the look or feel or shape of the world around them, but who transform the taste of the world, its culture, its soul just like a spirit of holiness inside a person doesn't change the look or shape of a person, but changes their soul.

You are a disciple of Jesus Christ. You are a light for all the world. If you allow that light to be reflected and magnified by a spirit of holiness you will help other people to find themselves and chart their holy course through this world.

You are a disciple of Jesus Christ. You are salt to the world. If you allow that salt to be savoured by a spirit of holiness, then your presence in this world will help to transform it so that our world will taste like God's kingdom.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOiLH-2hTPQ>