

Linda Driver

Athelstone Uniting Church #186

5 February 2023

Greatness of Heart / Salt and Light

Text: Matthew 5:13-20 (NIV)

The season of Epiphany continues – a season of star gazing and wonder – a season of new insights – of a-ha! moments. A season of light!

I'm going to read you a story about Light..

Read story: *When God made light* by Matthew Paul Turner¹

The lovely book, *When God made light*, picks up on a theme that pops up a lot in the gospel of Matthew – that we are the light of the world.

John said that Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus (in the gospel of Matthew) passes that role on to his disciples and to us: we are the light.

Jesus uses this image as part of his sermon on the mount, when he says: You are the light of the world.

And just before that he says: You are the salt of the earth.

These are the two images I want to focus on today from this passage: salt and light.

Why did Jesus choose salt and light?

Let's think back to what was happening in the world at the time..

Jesus was part of the Jewish or Israelite community – a community who lived on land that was occupied by the Roman Empire. Yes, they had returned from the wilderness to the land of their ancestors, but here they still were in a form of exile, with their land, their city and their temple ruled by Others – Romans.

What would this have meant to them? What did the Lord require of them? (quoting the prophet Micah)

Some said: let's collaborate with those who occupy our land (Sadducees)

Some said: let's take up arms and fight the empire! (zealots)

¹ <https://matthewpaulturner.com/books/when-god-made-light/>

Some, the Pharisees, said: let's build our own safe place, an enclave, a ghetto, where we can go into even deeper study and practice of Torah – God's Law. And this way, we can preserve our cultural and our religious identity – as people called and set apart by God. They believed that God's reign was coming soon, so thought they would wait it out - in their own self-imposed kind of exile.

Jesus, who Matthew showed as the one who had the authority and wisdom to interpret Torah, was teaching into that context:

I think he was saying that if you live that way, you are keeping God's way of living to yourself. And anyone who is not in the enclave misses out!

Other behaviours included putting their religion on display – public Jesus was saying, don't wait... God is already doing a new thing! The kingdom is near!

Through the prophet Isaiah, Israel had been called to be a light to the nations – to the gentiles – the rest of the world.

So Jesus was reminding them of their true identity: saying, go, make a difference in this world, now!

Go, be salt and be light!

.... and don't shout about it. Don't draw attention to yourself. Simply Be Salt and Light

So let's look at the properties of salt and light

they are ordinary, everyday things.

They are things that we may take for granted.

We might not even notice they are present... until they are not... and then we notice their absence.

They make a difference, not by anything remarkable they do, but by their very nature.

We too are called to make a difference, not always by our 'good works', but by who we are as we live our lives as followers of Christ.

Salt is essential to life as it allows for the proper function of the human body along with other life forms on Earth.

We think of salt as seasoning – a flavour enhancer, but it also serves as a preservative and disinfectant. Today, Salt is a common substance. In Jesus' day, it was highly valued, even serving as a unit of exchange.

Light is used to illuminate things. To draw attention to things.

Light helps us see things for what they really are

Light helps us appreciate beauty and detail

Paul (my husband) has a deep appreciation for torches. He has a lot of torches. After the service, you might like to ask him how many torches he has on him right now! You'd be surprised! He makes sure I have enough torches – in my bag, on my keys, in my car. And those he is closest to, have received a torch from Paul – a torch chosen especially for their needs. Why? He wants to ensure that we can see, that we are safe, and that the things we need to see are well illuminated.

light and Salt are only useful when they enhance something else.²

Christ continues to call us today, to remember who we are – the light of the world – and to be that light – every day.

As salt, how are we essential to the community around us? How do we draw attention to what God is doing? Would our community notice if we were not here? What difference do we make?

Last week, you might recall, I shared with you a dream or vision I had for Athelstone.

Informed by Micah's question, 'What does God require of us' today? Or perhaps: how are we being salt and light?

I had been reflecting on the work Church Council is doing in updating our strategic plan.

We had spent time over the summer break, praying about what things God is calling us to focus on as part of God's dream for Athelstone, what things we need to let go of and what things can wait for now.

I had been pondering all these things, and a new vision began to emerge. One that reflects what we are doing as a church – what our strengths and style are – and what we are hoping to move towards.

It's the underlying theology about the Why and How we do what we do. While the strategic plan expands on the What and When.

It's not a normal kind of dream!

I am going to share it with you again – for those who may have missed it last week – and I have refined it a little

² Cheryl Wilson *worship at home*

Do you remember the Great Commission?

Later, in the gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:16-20), at another gathering with the disciples on a mountain, Jesus had said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This is what we call the great commission.

The dream that I want to share with you is how I think we can, and in some ways, are, living out the great commission at Athelstone Uniting Church.

there is an adage Believe, Behave, Belong.. which more recently has become Belong, Behave, Believe. These are some approaches to mission and evangelism.

The three B's of Mission:

Belong = finding your place in the body of Christ, using your gifts for worship, witness and service

Behave = learning how to be a disciple of Jesus

Believe = growing in faith in Jesus

The idea is that we help people feel a sense of *belonging*, we model how to *behave* as disciples of Christ, and eventually people might come to believe in Jesus.

It could also be that someone comes to faith (*Belief*), then goes looking for a church where they can find out more, they learn how to *behave* as a disciple, and along the way, feel a sense of *belonging*.

Perhaps a version of this is part of your story?

I have been pondering the three B's for some time – and how they work for us at Athelstone – particularly in relation to discipleship and our strategic plan.

I didn't think there were enough Bs! So I have expanded the three B's to Seven!

Beloved. Bless. Befriend. Belong. Behave. Believe. Be.



Beloved = We are loved. Beloved people of God.

This undergirds everything that follows. It is the core of who we are as Christians. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

We see others as beloved too, and so we share this agape love unconditionally.

Bless = We express this love by blessing others as we too have been blessed. Let's be honest, we are a relatively wealthy middle-class congregation. Many of us – not all of us - can honestly say we have been blessed with all we need and more. So we bless others. Not in a 'there-there-poor-thing' kind of way – but in a genuine desire to share what we have with those who may be struggling, to access the resources they need to thrive.

We express this in acts of kindness, generosity, practical care, empathetic listening and working for the common good in our local community and beyond.

Befriend = As God has befriended us in love, through Jesus, we too actively build connections and grow relationships. This is a particular strength of this church! We share our story and show genuine interest in listening to others' stories. We value these relationships for what they are, rather than as 'means to an end'. For some people that is as far as their discipleship connection will go. 'A friend to a Christian'. Or even 'a friend of Jesus'. Not necessarily a 'believer' or a 'Christian'.

As bees spread pollen from flower to flower, so may our relationship-building be 'pollinators for the Kingdom of God.'

Belong = We demonstrate welcome and hospitality, making space for newcomers, helping them feel a sense of warmth and belonging.

We encourage use of our gifts and skills as ways of helping people feel they are both part of our community and part of God's story.

We baptise infants and adults, welcoming them into the family of God. (highlight the font)

Behave = We teach and demonstrate Christian values and behaviour, markers of the followers of Jesus (disciples). We encourage use of our gifts in ministry: including worship, sharing love, serving, caring for people and our earth, advocating, being generous and creative, and so on.

Believe = We encourage one another on our spiritual journeys as we grow in faith and love of Jesus. We provide safe spaces and make ourselves available to learn and to ask questions that will help us grow in faith and understanding. We respect that we are all different and delight in learning from one another.

Be = We encourage each other to spend time being loved and nurtured in the company of God.
In silence. In prayer. With music. In nature.
By the beach. Appreciating beauty.

The seven B's: Beloved. Bless. Befriend. Belong. Behave. Believe. Be.

Perhaps you would put the Bs in a different order – that's OK with me.. as long as we always Begin with Beloved. Because everything flows from that. We are loved.

There are lots of other worthy B-words, including Become! And perhaps you can think of more. But for now, let's stick with the seven B's for Athelstone.

My hope is the Seven B's will be an easy and natural way for us to live out The Great Commission at Athelstone. As easy and natural as it is for bees to spread pollen from flower to flower.

I think this is how we are Salt and Light as a church. We can apply it as individuals too

As followers of Jesus, let us make a difference by who we are, as the light of God's love shines from within us.

Salt and Light.

Amen.