

**5th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY –6<sup>th</sup> February  
2011 Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle**

**7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Holy  
Baptism & Solemn Eucharist**

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12); Psalm 112; 1  
Corinthians 2<sup>o</sup>1-13 (14-16); Matthew 5:13-20

You're nervous because you're going for a job interview; or you have to give a speech at a wedding reception; or you've been asked to sing a solo at a special function. In these and other similar situations that fill you with some anxiety and trepidation, the advice frequently given by a family member or close friend is, "Just be yourself."

For many people, coming to church is largely about getting you to do something. "Pray more, do more, give more." "You ought, you should, you must." We could call it religion in the imperative mood. The imperative mood is the mood of command. And certainly the Ten Commandments are in the imperative mood: "Thou shalt not."

In my last Parish, when I was still quite new there, we held a training afternoon for those who served in some capacity at Sunday services: reading the scriptures, praying the intercessions, greeting people at the door, serving, administering the chalice at Holy Communion and so on. One dear lady said she'd be there then asked, "So what are we doing wrong?" I had already heard

years earlier the reason many parishioners came to church: "Because we need to hear what we've done wrong and then be told what we need to do to get it right." The unspoken message is, don't be yourself because who you are isn't good enough. And for many people both inside and outside the church, this is the essence of going to church and the reason the church exists. It's a religion of do's and don'ts. "Don't drink, smoke, cuss or chew, or run around with girls that do."

Our Gospel readings this year are from Matthew. Matthew may come across as one who has plenty of ought, must, should: "Judge not that you be not judged" (7:1). "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way easy, that leads to destruction" (7:13). "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (7:19).

Then we heard last Sunday: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (5:3, 5). Jesus *didn't* say, "Not you *must be* poor in spirit, *then* you'll have the kingdom of heaven. You *must* try really hard to be meek, *then* you will inherit the earth." It's not a command; it's a statement of fact. It's not in the imperative, but the indicative – a statement of what is. This is the way it is in the kingdom of heaven.

Then in verse eleven Jesus shifts to those before him, the disciples. "Blessed are *you*." This is a little more direct than general statements of fact. We shift a little uncomfortably at this more direct approach of Jesus. "*You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the

world.” Jesus doesn’t say they *ought* to be salt or that they *should* be light. He says they *are*.

[As we celebrate Holy Baptism this morning, we not only witness Linton and Tara-Lee making promises to bring up Isla in the faith and practice of the Church.] We are being reminded where it all began for us. We received the gift of life at birth; we receive the gift of new life in baptism. As members of the human race, it makes little sense to be told “Be human.” We already are. Of course, in our worse moments, we can and do sometimes behave in ways that we’d consider inhuman. As members of the Church, those who’ve received the gift of new birth from God, it makes little sense to be told “Be Christian.” We already are. Of course, in our worse moments, we can and sometimes do behave in ways that we’d consider unchristian.

So it’s probably more accurate to say, “Be who you are. Be yourself.” Live out your humanity. Live out your baptism. So Jesus, in our Gospel reading today, doesn’t say you *should* /*must* be salt and light. Rather, you *are* salt and light. Now, be who you are. Well, how do we do that? There is a perception that to be Christian, to be a faithful disciple/follower of Jesus and a faithful member of the Church, means to *not* be human, to be other than human. Humanity is sinful and corrupt so it’s believed, *therefore* being human is the problem, *therefore* we need to somehow eradicate or obliterate our humanity.

The goal of the Christian life is not to become less than human, but *more* human or better still, *truly* human. A

2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop of the Church, St Irenaeus said ‘The glory of God is a human being fully alive.’ Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” or “life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10). Are you living life to the full? When we are living life to the full, we are demonstrating/witnessing that God’s life is in us. That’s what it means to be salt and light.

**What is salt?** Tiny grains of sodium chloride that don’t appear significant but when they’re missing we notice. Ever been on a salt free diet? A few times I’ve bought by accident salt free peanut butter or salt free something else. I notice the difference. We don’t eat salt on its own. But when it’s added to food it makes a huge difference. Too much is bad.

As disciples of Jesus we’re to be sprinkled around. We’re a minority; most people in this city and across the country will not be in church today. We’re sprinkled around our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, schools and universities, to savour them, to add flavour and zest.

Salt was used in Jesus’ day as a preservative because there was no refrigeration. I was always told in Sunday school and so on that our being salt in the world is to preserve and purify it. Jesus says salt is useless if it’s lost its taste, its flavour, its saltiness, **if it stops being itself**. So it would seem he isn’t talking about salt as a preservative.

Without you Christians the world has no zest, no flavour. The image of Christians as sour puritanical killjoys with faces that could draw a wart on a tombstone

is a caricature of how we are meant to be. Without us the world would be boring and insipid. Is that how it is in reality? Or is it time you started being yourself?

Yes, it's tough. I'm at the age now when I can still remember a time when most of the people we knew either went to church or had some loose association with a church. It seemed we were numerically strong and culturally significant. It was like the world we inhabited was *our* world, with *our* kind of people living in it. When I was in third grade in primary school, our scripture teacher couldn't make it one day. So our regular teacher said, no problem, I'll take the lesson. She took the scripture lesson book then proceeded to tell us the parable of the Pharisee and the publican with such dramatic flair and captivating style, *and* obvious familiarity with the story, we asked if she could take all our scripture classes. This was in a state school. Can you imagine that happening today?

Can you imagine there was time when petrol stations and shops were closed on Sundays? Did you have to leave early for church this morning to avoid the heavy traffic caused by all the other people going to church? I don't think so.

We are a minority; we feel small and insignificant. We're just a few small grains of salt scattered within a vast bland casserole of secularism, indifference and at times outright hostility. Jesus said, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt 22:14). In such an environment, Jesus calls us to be who we are, to be salt and light. Like salt, **light** is important not itself so much

as for what it enables to happen. We don't stare at the light. We all know to look directly into the sun will damage our eyes. The light of the sun or from a light bulb allows us to see something else. Light transforms its surrounding environment. Without us the world can't see what it is. William H. Willimon says, "The world has no means of seeing that it is violent, that all of its national orders and governments are propped up by force, until it meets someone who isn't violent. People...don't know they're superficial until they come face-to-face with someone who isn't. The world needs you to be redeemed before it can know that it is fallen, corrupt and sin-filled. The world must stumble across just one free person still running loose before the world sees how enslaved it is to a host of cruel masters. You are the only light that world has, says Jesus. Hide your light under a basket, and everyone stumbles."

Just be yourself. Little things like how you spend your money, your choice of words, the way you use your body and other people's bodies, your use of time all demonstrate to the world that you're salt and light. In this season after Epiphany we're continuing to discover how the light within us (which is Jesus) is being manifested or revealed among us. [As Isla is baptised she will be given a candle as a reminder that we are all called to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God.] In a few moments we will all come up to this altar to take the bread of life, to be transformed by the light of the world to be salt and light to savour the world; to be bread to feed this hungry world.

