**5th February 2023**

[**Call to worship**](javascript:void(0))

When our words are not enough, how should we act?  
When our actions seem too little, how should we pray?  
God calls us to speak and act and pray, that others will see  
and praise God through the love that shines from us.

[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Lord, open our eyes to those who need help.  
Keep us from giving up  
when it seems too difficult to help everyone.  
Help us to remember that you renew and restore,  
and let us be as salt and light in all the places around us.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of approach**](javascript:void(0))

Light of the world,  
may your light shine in us,  
may your light shine out of us,  
and may our light shine on all in our communities,  
as we come to worship you today.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

Restorer God,  
we praise you for who you are –  
our healer and our redeemer.  
Your light has broken forth like the dawn.  
You came into our darkness to live among us,  
your body broken on the cross that we might live.  
We cry out to you and you respond: ‘Here I am.’  
Transforming God, we adore you.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

**A prayer of confession**

Restorer God,  
we have sinned against you in our thoughts and actions.  
You came to loose the bonds of injustice,  
and we have stood by and said nothing.  
**Restorer of the streets – forgive us.**You came to let the oppressed go free,  
and we have kept them in chains.  
**Restorer of the streets – forgive us.**You asked us to share our bread with the hungry,  
and we let them starve.  
**Restorer of the streets – forgive us.**You asked us to bring the homeless into our homes,  
and we shut the door.  
**Restorer of the streets – forgive us.**Restorer, healer, forgive us and transform us,  
so our hearts and our homes will always be open –  
open to you and the call you have placed on our lives  
to be lights in our communities.  
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Forgiving God,  
thank you that even when we let you down,  
when we have not acted as you would,  
when we have allowed our light to fade  
and our saltiness to lose its flavour,  
still we are forgiven and healed and restored in you –  
ready to go out and shine for you.  
**Amen.**

**Matthew 5.13-20**

**Salt and light**

Why does Jesus describe his followers as salt and light for the world around them?

Cooking pasta. How much salt should I use? A Jug? A cup? Tablespoon?

Called not to dominate, nor overwhelm or possess or control – but in humility to make ourselves available and useful – give other people freedom and confidence. May mean more listening and less speaking: may mean being less concerned about being thought important and more concerned that other people’s needs are being recognized. Way of quiet loving service.

Light – flash at people blind them. Not blind others with our natural brilliance or trying to subtly impress them, like disco lights flashy effect.

What kind of light? Practical lamp like a reading lamp. Helps people see better?

So don’t bump into things and hurt themselves – so get on with living effectively.

Salt and light – simple things but can make a real difference.

Called to just be our ordinary selves but through faith in God able to make a difference**.**

**Commentary**

Jesus states that these two natural things have obvious purposes: salt to impart saltiness and light to illuminate. In this parable, salt can change to lose its saltiness. When this happens, it is no longer good for anything. We may wonder, in what ways can we change for the worse as disciples, or change our essential nature to the point that we are no longer recognisable as disciples? Do we cease to be ‘salty’ when we lose an awareness of our poverty of spirit, for instance; or when we cease to engage with communities as merciful peacemakers who thirst for justice? Salt is a substance that transforms the things that it is mixed with. Is Jesus making a point about the way we engage with those around us? Light, on the other hand, makes an environment safe. In the days before  street lighting and electric light bulbs, travelling at dusk or in the dark must have been very difficult. Imagine the relief that someone would feel on spotting the light given out by a city on a hill. Domestically, it would make no sense to ignite a light and then to hide it away. The qualities of character and moral choices described in the context of this passage are to be lived out with others and for others. Jesus’ words about the law in verses 17 to 19 are a preface to intensifying the qualities that God requires of us

**Jesus calls obvious people**

Jesus calls his Church to stand out and be noticed (Matthew 5:16)

**Context**

* The past week has seen some [half-a-million people take industrial action](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-set-biggest-strike-action-years-teachers-civil-servants-walk-out-2023-02-01/) on a single day, from teachers and lecturers to civil servants and train drivers. The coming week will almost certainly see nurses, ambulance staff, paramedics, emergency call handlers and other workers taking similar action.
* Many of these groups have stated very clearly that the strikes are not only about the real-terms pay cuts they are suffering in the face of soaring inflation, but also about their current inability to provide adequate services to their [passengers](https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/rail-strikes-nuisance-plans-ditch-26086350), [patients](https://www.northnorfolknews.co.uk/news/national/23283502.protesters-rally-emergency-response-nhs-crisis/) and other clients.
* A recent poll indicates that [public support for them is growing](https://news.sky.com/story/rising-public-support-for-unions-despite-widespread-strikes-sky-news-poll-suggests-12799325); but whether or not we think their actions are justified, they are undeniably making their positions obvious to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear.

**Ideas for sermons or interactive talks**

In this week’s Gospel reading, Matthew presents Jesus issuing a call to his followers to make ourselves obvious. Comparing us with light, which is useless if no one can actually see it, he tells us in no uncertain terms that to have any impact on the problems and challenges facing God’s world, we must make ourselves noticed for our good works.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Two things stand out here:

* First, this is a call to collective action. Although Jesus is addressing a large crowd of his followers, the word ‘light’ is singular. We are called as a body to be one big light, rather than lots of little individual lights. This is underlined by the image of the city on a hill (Matthew 5:14b), which is a large group of people visible to everyone for miles around, as opposed to lots of individual huts on their own little hills. Our city is the city of God, and we must always keep in mind that we are acting as parts of a greater whole (1 Corinthians 12:27), and not to have our own individual roles praised (Matthew 6:1-6). The light we shed is not for our own glory, but for the glory of God-in-Christ.
* Second, we must be prepared to face opposition. If we are shining as Jesus would have us do, then our light will reveal much that those responsible for society’s problems would rather remain hidden. This will, as Jesus has just warned (Matthew 5:10-11), almost inevitably bring us into confrontation with those who hold power but are reluctant to use it for the general good (Matthew 10:16-20). At the same time, we must recognise our own collective shortcomings, and seek continually to purge the Church of anything that fails to reflect God’s unconditional love for all people.

**Questions for discussion**

**Funeral of Kathryn Palmer:**

Kathryn had a wonderful testimony. I marvelled at how she could stand before a congregation and talk so personally and powerfully about her faith and what God had been doing in her life. She had an eloquent evangelistic gift for sharing the good news about how Jesus changed her life.  
  
She told me to say that her hope was that those who came to her funeral would know of the joy and security she has known in Jesus her Lord and Saviour.  
  
She was anti Christianity. She was angry at God, She was vehemently opposed to the church. She shared an office at Social Services with Andrew Grainger a committed Christian, whose enthusiasm for his faith just put Kathryn off. His conversations with her always made her angry. She would pick arguments with him. He would leave pamphlets on her desk. This went on for three years. One book he left for her was David Watsons ‘You are my God’. One day she decided to read it. She read about the work of the Holy Spirit and so decided to pray one Friday night ‘God if you are there, I want to know you’. She said there were no bolts of lightning yet over the next three days she experienced a great joy, like falling in love, being washed clean.  
  
Maurice, her husband, thought she was having an affair. ‘Have you found another man’ he asked her. ‘How old is he?’  
‘About 2000 years’ she wittily replied.

How do we shine our light? The social worker was enthusiastic about his faith but put Kathryn off. Persistent with his pamphlets. Yet eventually she read one. If he hadn’t persisted would Kathryn found the peace and joy of knowing Jesus? Do you have to get into people faces – especially the proud arrogant types? Do you need to provoke a response?

* **How does our own Church – the community, rather than the building – shine as light in the world, making us obvious to those around us?**
* **How can we lose our saltiness?**
* Within any Church community, we are likely to find a range of opinions. How do we identify social issues on which we can agree to take a common stand?
* What experiences of confronting the misuse of power has our Church had?

*Robert Beard is an NHS worker, freelance writer and Church of England priest.*

**Check-in**

Connecting faith with everyday, real-life issues for young people

The ROOTS resources this week invite us to explore the call to revitalise our communities.

You only have to turn on the news, scan the newspaper headlines or spend five minutes on social media to be reminded just how dark the world can be. In many communities, young people experience this ‘darkness’ for themselves: financial pressures on families, redundancies, long waits for needed medical intervention, covid-impact, refugees fleeing war-torn Ukraine.

At the end of a long winter, it can feel hard to hold on to hope. But that is exactly what Jesus says into this context, speaking directly to people living under occupation and oppression: ‘You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world.’ And no matter how dark the world may feel right now, no matter how dark our communities may feel, and how insignificant we may worry that our light is, the darkness cannot extinguish even the smallest flame.

If you feel too small to make a difference, find comfort in these words that God sees things differently. In God’s strength, let us pray that we can bring that light to the dark places and shine for all to see.

Becky May is Founder of [The Resources Cupboard](http://www.theresourcescupboard.co.uk/)

* Salt describes something that is perceived internally or within a certain substance – it is immediately identifiable by taste. Light is something that happens externally – outside in the landscape or filling a space. Perhaps Jesus chose these metaphors to make sure that the inside and outside of life – our interior world of thought, our exterior world of objects and actions – are both covered in our understanding of discipleship. Most of us lean towards one sphere or the other. How can we learn to appreciate the outer or inner world that seems less important to us? How can we appreciate one another’s differences and work together, so that our strengths are complementary?
* Faith does not happen in a social vacuum. It is not possible to draw a dividing line between the person I am at work or at home, and the person that I am in church. Isaiah 58 reminds us of this in graphic terms: a true fast can never sit alongside injustice. It is not just a question of doing a bit more in terms of justice, but doing less in terms of injustice. We may feel that we have little power, but we can work at giving up ‘the pointing of the finger’ and ‘the speaking of evil’. We often do these things without thinking and without self-awareness.
* We are called to practise what we preach, to ‘walk the talk’. Isaiah listed some of the ways in which we could please God with genuine love, rather than token acts of piety. Eight hundred years later Jesus says again that we worship when we make a difference in our everyday lives. What can we offer in our own situation? More importantly, what does our community need? A church can be a hub for a food bank, or a drop-in centre. Could you encourage an existing charity to use your building, and give them your support, in finance, prayer and in person? To be salt is to add flavour, to improve something already there. Just as you would not heap a spoonful of salt onto your egg, but sprinkle ‘just enough’, so we need to be ‘streetwise’ about what will best enhance our neighbourhood.
* ‘If it’s open, close it. If it’s empty, fill it. If it’s dirty, clean it. If it’s broken, fix it. If it’s sad, love it.’ Isaiah says, ‘restore’ and Jesus says, ‘that’s your job!’ The readings from Isaiah and Matthew describe how we are called to live in a way that shines God’s light into dark places in order to make a difference. By our practical care we can rebuild our ruins and restore our streets. We can see the damage in our societies, and we know which ‘streets’ need to be restored, which areas are blighted by poverty, neglect and crime. Where is your ‘street’ that needs to be restored? Be it your family, church, class, online circle of friends, or whatever – what can you restore there?

**Thought for the week**

**Read out in place of a sermon if you wish**

You may have seen a plaque in someone’s house that says: ‘If it’s open, close it. If it’s empty, fill it. If it’s dirty, clean it. If it’s sad, love it.’

While Isaiah says ‘restore’, so Jesus says to us ‘that’s your job!’ The readings from Isaiah and from Matthew both describe how we are called to live in the world in a way that will shine God’s light into dark places in order to make a difference. Isaiah goes so far as to suggest that by our practical care for others we can rebuild our ruins and restore our streets. After 2,800 years we can still see damage in areas of our societies, and we know which ‘streets’ need to be restored, which areas are blighted by poverty, neglect and crime.

During Covid, some streets gained a sense of community by helping each other. Others will have been pulled apart by health and economic pressures. Which is your ‘street’ that needs to be restored? Your street, the place where you spend time, might be your family, church, class, online circle of friends. What can you make a start on restoring or repairing?

Dealing with injustice and oppression points to our call to challenge authorities, as Isaiah knew well. His warnings about turning away our own flesh and blood, or using a pointing finger or malicious talk strike closer to home. How can we sprinkle a little salt to improve life, or shed light into a dark situation close to us? We might think we are but one very small light to make a difference to the world, but one torch makes all the difference in the darkness of a power cut. You don’t always have to be the source of the light: a few visible reflective strips on a jacket can save lives. And when many small lights are brought together they make a strong beacon!

Enough light metaphors! Except to point out that a torch needs to be energised and switched on, and a candle needs lighting – action is required to make something happen. No amount of instructions on the label or box will achieve anything by itself. We are called to take action, to restore what has fallen into brokenness, to repair relationships, to ‘rise in the darkness’.



[**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**](javascript:void(0))

Father God,  
thank you that you have prepared for us  
far more than we can ever hope, believe or imagine;  
no eye, no ear, no heart can conceive  
what you have prepared for those who love you.  
That is so amazing!  
Thank you that you restore us and transform us  
to become the people you have called us to be.  
Thank you that you are the light of the world.  
Thank you that you are the salt of the earth.  
Thank you that in you we can be salt and light too,  
that we can go out and revitalise our communities,  
bringing hope and renewal to our families, our friends,  
our neighbours and our churches. **Amen.**



[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

Loving God, this week has seen a lot of unrest. Millions of people have faced disruption either through being on strike or as a consequence of the strikes. It is very unsettling and difficult and can make life feel very uncertain for both the strikers and those caught up in the effects of industrial action. We pray for calm resolution, fair and just settlements, genuine engagement for all sides in the negotiations and for people to listen and find empathy for each other.

Loving God, revitalise our communities  
**and bring hope and light.**

Father God, three years on from Brexit and we are still aware of the vast gulfs between the different sides in the debate. We are aware that there are very different opinions held about Brexit and that peoples lived experiences since Brexit are wildly different. It’s emotive and hard to talk about, but we pray that as your people we would seek to be those who bring reconciliation and healing, to show support where needed, and kindness to others – even when they may hold views very different to ours. Help us to view everyone we encounter as a child of God and to engage with others as precious beings in your creation.

Father God, revitalise our communities  
**and bring hope and light.**

Dear Lord, as the half term begins for many children and young people, we pray that they would be refreshed by time away from school and energised for the term ahead. We are well aware of the issues young people face as they grown up in 2023: the ease with which they can access brutal or pornographic content on the internet, the difficulties associated with social media platforms, the increase in anxiety and mental health problems and the problems associated with trying to access services and professional help. But you, Lord, bring light into the darkness. You are with all of us in our day-to-day difficulties, temptations and worries. Please help our children and young people to find fullness in you. Help our children and young people to know what is good and pure and to turn towards your light.

Dear Lord, revitalise our communities  
**and bring hope and light.**

God of all, we pray for the communities we live in and the communities across this world that we are associated with. We pray for the people we encounter in our villages, towns and cities. For colleagues, friends and neighbours. For those who are suffering and those who are well. For those who are finding the cost of living hard to bear and for those who want for nothing. For those we like and those we don’t. For the leaders and those who are led. For the powerful people, and the powerless. For everyone we encounter in our daily lives, we pray for them all and ask that you bring your transformation and divine peace.

God of all, revitalise our communities  
**and bring hope and light.**



[**A prayer for all ages together**](javascript:void(0))

Each time it occurs, shout out the **‘RE’**. You could signal this by holding up a card at the appropriate points.

Lord who mends, help us to  
**RE** store.  
Lord of fresh ideas, help us to  
**RE** new.  
Lord who lifts us up, help us to  
**RE** build.  
Lord who gives us life, help us to  
**RE** vive.  
In our world and our church, in everyday life,  
Lord, help us to be  
**RE** freshed by you.  
**Amen.**



[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Light of the world, shine through us.  
Like salt of the earth,  
scatter us where there is need.  
Help us work together  
to repair and renew,  
to rebuild and rejoice  
throughout this place.  
In Jesus’s name.  
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2023/123-january-february-2023-a/epiphany-5/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)