

Sermon 20170205 St Margaret's UC

Rev Dr Barry Brown – Text: Matt 5:13 – 16

These notes are in précis form rather than verbatim. Prepared in advance as 'notes for preaching', they may not reflect exactly what was preached. Preaching is peculiar speech, a dynamic form of communication that needs to be open to the leading of God's Spirit, faithful to the Biblical text, and mindful of the hearer's attention.

Introduction

Eighteen months ago I concluded writing our joint family history under the title ***Whence We Came***. This included an account of both Heather's and my forebears from the time they left their country of origins to come to Australia. In some instances I was also able to include information about the families in the generations before their immigration to Australia. One of the surprises in researching Heather's side of the family was that her maternal great-great grandfather, Christian Hirsch, was **Jewish and came from Prussia as a refugee** in the 1850s. Christian's father was Samuel Hirsch, and all of Christian's brothers that can be identified had very Jewish names – Samuel, Levi, Simeon... etc.

Two things stand out for Heather from this background: (1) She has Jewish blood. In fact, as Jewish pedigree is usually traced through the female line, Heather could make the claim that she is herself Jewish; (2) the second significant factor is that her forebears were refugees. These are sobering matters to reflect upon.

When we turn to the Gospel according to Matthew we are reminded not only

that Jesus was Jewish, but so too (largely) was the Christian community for whom this sacred document was composed. I say composed because **Matthew was not a biographer. He was an interpreter.** Using information available to him, he composed his 'Gospel' as a means of enabling his hearers (it was probably read aloud) and readers to listen to Jesus addressing them in their own situation – some 55 years on and in vastly different circumstances.

Our task is to listen to Jesus and discern his words addressing us in our situation and our time.

A couple of comments about today's Gospel Reading:

(1) We shall attend only to Matthew 5:13 - 16 – *You are salt of the earth... light of the world... a city built on a hill.* I encourage you to re-read the second half of the passage during this week in preparation for next Sunday. These verses are intended to introduce the remainder of the chapter where Matthew records Jesus saying a number of things, prefaced by: ***You have heard it said, but I say to you...***

(2) The second thing to note is that in these verses, as indeed for the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, the opening word, **You**, is in the plural form. This is not always clear in English. But in its original form it is specifically in the second person plural. This means that the teaching of Jesus is intended particularly for the community of disciples. Any meaning it may have for the individual is derived from them being a member of the Christian community. The importance of this is that these words of Jesus are intended for us to hear as community – as church (a word Matthew uses in his Gospel).

So I want now to speak to you as part of the Christian community. I hope you can hear what I say – No, what Jesus says – to us as church.

Like the beatitudes (the blessed) we considered last Sunday, these words are not commands, such as you must be salt of the earth, you must be light of the world... a city on a hill. They are exclamations. ***You ARE salt of the earth, you ARE light of the world... a city on a hill.***

These must have been puzzling things for Matthew's community to understand. They were refugees living in a strange and foreign place. They were no longer welcome to worship with their fellow Jews – to attend synagogue. They were facing major challenges in what was for them very troubling times. Yet here they are being affirmed – but not because of who they were, but WHOSE they

were. They are followers of Jesus, the crucified-risen Lord, whose Spirit was the living presence that was central to their faith, their community, and their understanding of ministry. They, and other Christian communities did take heart. Otherwise we would not have this Gospel, and we may not have heard the Good News; and we may not be gathered here as we are today.

Now let us consider our own time and endeavour to listen to Jesus words to us in our time and context.

Of course we each have many contexts; but I wish to lift up the situation of the Christian church (in its various forms and denominations – including Saint Margaret's UC).

Some of you will be aware that Heather and I recently celebrated **our fiftieth (50th)** wedding anniversary. In January 1967 went straight from our honeymoon to my first appointment as a home missionary in the Kerang-Barham Methodist Circuit. This means my experience as a minister has now covered 50 years – half a century. In the mid-1960s the Christian Church in countries like Australia had just had a significant growth spurt – the post WW2 period. Yet a downward spiral was becoming visible to some, but not all. In theological circles there was a debate going on about the relevance of the church, and the catch-cry was sometimes summed up by what became known as *The Death of God debate*. This was, for me, the beginning of a period of ministry during major transition. Many of the

congregations I served with in my earlier ministry have now closed. Others have diminished significantly in numbers and viability; not to mention loss of courage and hope. In the church that I know, first as Methodist and later as the Uniting Church, there has been a steady decline over the past 50 years.

Decline, changes and challenges seemed to have hastened in the past few years. **Three examples** come to mind:

(1) From 1978 to 1987 I was minister to the congregation of Wesley Church, Melbourne, and associate minister of Wesley Central Mission. In November last year I attended by invitation the celebration of the 123rd anniversary of Wesley Mission. This was also the final anniversary of this rather large and significant mission as it was, effectively, going out of existence and being absorbed into a new body within the Uniting Church in Victoria – simply called *Uniting*. It is yet to be seen what this might mean. But, initially, for me, it represents a significant change in the way we see and do mission in our present circumstances.

(2) After my 10 years at Wesley I spent eight years as minister of the Deep Creek Uniting Church. These were exiting years as the congregation grew from a small cluster of people meeting at a local school – into a congregation that sometimes reached 200. It was a privilege to be minister of a growing and vibrant congregation, especially being part of the group that

planned for and built a brand new facility designed for growth and missional activity. Deep Creek does not exist now as a separate congregation. It is part of the larger Manningham Congregation with worship facilities at Doncaster, Templestowe, North Box Hill and Deep Creek (East Doncaster). In the latter part of last year, following a lengthy missional strategy study, it was decided to sell the Deep Creek and Doncaster, properties and concentrate worship and missional activities at a re-developed site at Templestowe. I am not being critical of those that have made these decisions. But I cite these major changes as they reflect the demise of the church as I have known it in our region.

(3) My last placement before retirement in 2007 was the Croydon Uniting Church. I took up this appointment shortly after the consolidation of two former Uniting Churches on one site. Signs of both decline were evident at a special service held a few weeks before my retirement – to celebrate 100 years since the establishment of both the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations in Croydon. Late last year, again after a missional strategy study triggered by significant decline in the congregation and challenging financial circumstances (and a church hall that had passed its used-by date) it was decided to sell the church hall, a manse and some of the land, and to downsize the existing church building to form a multi-purpose facility. These

changes reflect the wider reality of the church we know – and remind us of other stories that echo the same reality.

Now let me stress that I am not blaming others for what followed from the times I experienced in these settings. Indeed, if there was to be any consideration of such things, I'm sure that some could remind me that the fruit of a period of ministry is best discerned from what happens in the years that follow. I am simply acknowledging from my own experience as a minister of the Uniting Church **we are in a new place – a challenging and uncertain place.**

Close

SO, what do these words of Jesus have to say to us? *You are salt of the earth... light of the world... a city built on a hill.* Are these words we can believe? Are these words that can give us hope?

To both questions I want to declare, **Yes!** They are words we can believe. They come from Jesus, the crucified-risen Lord. And they are words that give us hope and remind us that God, the Living God, has many ways of being at mission – God's mission.

I am sad about the demise of the church as I have known it. I don't expect any immediate turn around. Nor do I blame anyone or single out any particular reason. I suspect much of the demise of the church reflects the nature of our modern Western culture, particularly its post-WW2 affluence.

Yet, I believe God does have a future for the church – but it is unlikely to be like the church as we have known it. Yet we are called to continue faithfully to be the people of Jesus and to pass on the faith tradition that has sustained us. Yes, we can hear the words of Jesus speaking to us - ***You ARE salt of the earth, you ARE light of the world... a city on a hill.***

Our role is to be faithful, and to continue to be a distinctive community in an ever changing and alien world. And we are to be **permission-givers** to a future generation of Christian disciples who may well discern the Spirit of God leading them into very different ways of being church.

And finally, we recall that Jesus calls us to be distinctive and faithful, not that WE might be strong and visible, but that we might be a means by which **glory is given to God, our Father in heaven.**