

**Sermon - 9 February 2014 - St. Paul's Ipswich**  
**The Rev. Robert Paget**

A fortnight ago we heard how the people who lived in darkness had seen a great light. We heard that the light of Christ has shone in places of darkness bringing light and hope where there was none. Certainly in the time of Jesus as in so many times before in the history of God's people their circumstances must have seemed so dark and life had become flavourless. And so from John's Gospel we heard from verses 4 and 5, that:

*in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.*

In this morning's gospel, Jesus turns the table on his followers. "You", he says, "you are the light, you are the salt".

On Australia Day, indigenous AFL player, Adam Goodes was named Australian of the Year. In a radio interview played on that day he recounted the day he was racially vilified by a young girl in the crowd at the MCG. He spoke with her after the game and it became apparent that she had no idea of the impact that her words had had on the player. She didn't even know what they meant. She was simply mimicking those around her without understanding. To many calling this sportsman an ape may well have even seemed like a compliment referring to his muscular frame. That was clearly what was on Eddie McGuire's mind days later when he suggested that it would be good to get Goodes to promote the King Kong stage musical. Only those who had been subjected to these references as racial taunts in the way that Goodes and his family along with so many from the indigenous community have could understand the deep hurt that they cause. I do not believe that either of these people meant to hurt Goodes or in any way meant them as a racial slur. They simply, either did not understand or in a careless moment said that which, given a moment for reflection they would never have said. On this occasion, for Adam Goodes, the world must have seemed a place void of light indeed and life a flavourless thing.

Darkness takes so many forms.

Salt, an interesting choice for Jesus to use as a metaphor. I wonder what sort of salt we are. Sometimes I look at the church and think of the warnings the Doctors make about having too much salt. "It is not good for you. It'll raise your blood pressure, harden your arteries and shorten your life", they say. At times it seems that we are *very* effective at being that kind of salt of the earth. We harden it's arteries shorten it's life and add to the misery of things. I know that for some people that this will appear to be an accurate description of the church as they are bombarded by news of the abuse of children in church run homes. It seems to be the Salvation Army in the hot seat at the moment but we have had a time in the spotlight and it has not been pleasant to be there.

But you'll be happy to know that this is not what Jesus meant when he called his followers "salt". In his time salt was a very valuable commodity, often extremely hard to come by and very expensive. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt and at times it was used as currency. Interestingly, after the collapse of the Soviet Socialist Republic many of the USSR military were paid out with Vodka. We won't mention the Rum Corps of New South Wales. Salt can also be used as a preservative, particularly useful before the time of refrigeration. It

also enhances the flavour of foods. I've noticed in many of the current crop of cooking shows that seasoning the dish is often referred to and adding some love to the dish. We could probably get an argument going over whether it is best added during the cooking or t the table.

The salt that Jesus called his disciples to be was this kind of salt, adding to the flavour of life, rather than detracting from it. I wonder, "What sort of salt are we?"

Not long ago after church I wandered down to street to conform trading hours of a store I wanted to visit. On the way back I overheard a mother talking to her young child as they walked past me. "They want you to give them respect", she said, "But they'll never give it to you". Just up the footpath behind them were a couple of members of this congregation. Now I don't know if the comment was deserved or even for that matter if the comment was in relation to what had just taken place. I did not see it. But it did strike me that we are not universally viewed by those around us in the terms that Jesus used. As pointed out by one of the Chaplains at the base during one of the mandatory training briefs this last week, "you can spend a lifetime building a good reputation but it can be lost in one thoughtless moment or foolish action." May be Shakespeare said it better though, through the words he gives to Mark Antony, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." The good we do, and let's face it the church has done so much good in the past but all that can be so easily forgotten in the darkness of a thoughtless moment.

I remember that every night at college during Compline we heard these words from the first letter of Peter urging is readers to maintain their self discipline,

1 Peter 5:8

*"Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion, your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour."*

While researching this weeks material I came across the following:

*I realize, of course, that he goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness is useless and that light wasn't made to be put under a bushel, which might imply for some that there is, indeed, a threat hiding amid this pronouncement. But I wonder. Can salt really lose its saltiness? Doesn't it just dissolve? And are candles ever put under bushel baskets? Wouldn't that snuff the flame or, worse, start a fire? Maybe Jesus is implying that one can lose one's status as salt and light. Or maybe he's just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light in order to underscore the reliability and resilience of the gift he bequeaths. "You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world. That's the way it is and that's the way it will stay. Period."*

David Lose on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

I guess the question that follows this is if we are not actively making this world a better place to be, then are we really being true Disciples of Christ. It is not an easy thing to do, granted. Paul goes so far as to suggest to the early Christians in Rome that what is needed is no less than a complete change in our attitudes.

*Romans. 12:1-2*

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

So we need to apply ourselves to being a light in the world. It's interesting that he didn't say, "you are a mirror to reflect the light" or "you are a salt container, to spread my flavour around". No he says, "You are the light" and "You are the salt." And these commodities are most useful when they are added to the places where they are missing. In other words, we are not lights to make the chandelier 5% brighter but to take light into the darkness. We are not declared to be salt to make things saltier, but to add flavour and preserve life where there is only decay and a flavourless existence. We are not called to improve our own existence but to improve the lot of those around us whoever they may be.

And just in case this leaves you feeling completely inadequate, remember that it was not unknown to declare someone to be something that they had not yet become in order to show them what they ought to become. On the one hand we are off the hook a little, but by how much simply indicates how much work there still is to put in, in order to be what we have already been proclaimed to be.

Michael Leunig wrote a poem that cropped up on Facebook recently. It indicates the deep sense of lost opportunity.

It is titled, *Sometimes a man apologises for something he didn't do.*  
For certain things I did I'm greatly sorry,  
And things I didn't do, more sorry still,  
I grieve that I rejected what was offered  
And grieve alone for these I always will.

There they were, such lively things before me  
Yet I turned around and walked away  
To wander weirdly in remorse and pity  
Wanting them until I die.

Little things and wildly blissful things  
How they nag and scratch my soul  
Lovely fruits forbidden that I wanted  
so available, sweet and whole.

For certain things you do you're greatly sorry  
Then they're done and then they've gone away  
It's life unlived you can never make sense of  
You never make it up again they say.

Be salt  
Be light.

Amen