

Feb 5, 2023 – Online service Bonni-Belle Pickard

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship – Micah

Jesus calls us here to meet him – StF 28

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvBGtFPd6TQ> (MB)

Prayer –

Meditation 1: Beatitudes

Blessed are they – StF 245

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwSkmzw8dY>

Matt 5: 13-16 –

Meditation 2: Being Salt

The kingdom of God is justice and joy (StF 255)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-PaZbwyy4g> Matt Beckingham
(not sung)

Meditation 3: Being Light

Show me how to stand for justice (StF 713)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8CIU66oFMQ> Joy Everingham

Intercessions

Sent by the Lord Am I (StF 239)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uN-oeDI7Ag>

Benediction

Micah 6:8

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Matthew 5:13-16

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand,
and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others,

so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Meditation 1: Beatitudes

This year's lectionary readings come from the Gospel of Matthew –

And over recent weeks, we've been following the beginnings of Jesus' ministry:
How he started out by going to hear John the Baptist preaching at the Jordan –

And telling people to repent...

How he himself went to be baptised by John –

How he then went into the wilderness for 40 days and night –

Being tested and tried

Presumably testing his call to understand better what God had for him to do.

(We'll explore more of that during Lent)

How he returned to Nazareth to begin his ministry,

But then heard that John had been arrested –

Presumably because he'd even said that King Herod needed to repent –

(There was that business about King Herod taking his brother's wife as his own)

And that hadn't gone down too well.

Being a prophet has its liabilities!

In any case, when Jesus hears that John has been arrested,

Jesus 'withdraws' to Galilee –

Specifically, leaving Nazareth and going further north—

Further away from Jerusalem and the political unrest –

Further even than Nazareth, where he had grown up –

Going to the far northern area of Naphtali and Zebulan –

A place that was primarily inhabited by Gentiles – so, non-Jews –

Though there were some Jews in some of the towns around the Sea...

So Jesus goes to Capernaum, on the northern shore of Lake Galilee –

About as far as one could get from Jerusalem and still be in the land of Israel...

Capernaum, like several other seaside towns around Galilee,

Was a fishing town – and on an important trade route called the Via Maris –

The road that led to the sea.

Capernaum's fishing business was heavily dependent on the trade route

Because the climate was hot, so the fish they caught would have rotted quickly.

They either had to get them quickly to market,

Or salt or preserve them to travel well.

Capernaum was especially famous for a kind of salted fish paste called *garum*,

A bit like ketchup...

Back to Capernaum --

It's location on the trade route also meant that there was a constant influx of news –

From near and far – word spread fast...

Such as news about people such like John and Jesus.

The fishing business at Capernaum also meant that there was a great need

For village infrastructure –

For people to make and repair boats and nets and sails,

For lead weights and anchors,

For floats and hooks and ropes and baskets...

And all those people would talk to each other, too, on a regular basis.

We know Jesus was a carpenter –

and we often think about that as either building homes or furniture –
but what if it were about building boats?

Is that how Jesus got into the community?
If so, the fish trade in Capernaum would have also put him in contact
With taxmen and govt officials ...
And those people would have talked with each other as well.

We know from Matthew's gospel that what attracted people most to Jesus' early ministry
Was his ability to heal –

Professional health care was practically non-existent, expensive at best –
So Jesus' healing touch would have drawn folks in.

And that gave him the opportunity to talk about healing not just individual bodies
But whole societies.

Jesus called that healing process 'the coming of God's Kingdom'.

The fact that he was interacting with people *where they were*,
In their daily lives, meant he could relate to them what he knew
About how God really wanted:
Societies of love and justice, of peace and joy.
And it wasn't just a pipe dream, it could be a reality.

Matthew's gospel tells us the people starting coming from far and wide to hear Jesus.
Apparently they came from all around Galilee,
Perhaps travelling by boat on the Sea of Galilee,
But also from 'across the Jordan' and even from Jerusalem –
Which would have been quite a way to travel on foot.
They'd heard about a healer, and they wanted to know more.
So Jesus starts to preach.

What we know as the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's gospel
Is probably an amalgamation of what people heard from him over a period of time.

That 'sermon' starts with what we know as the Beatitudes:
In it, Jesus begins to describe the situations people find themselves in –
Not as 'curses' but as 'blessings' –
things that bring them closer to God and each other.

Jesus tells them that if they're having a hard time –
Which most people would describe as being a 'curse'--
Either with finances or losing a close friend or family member,
Or the authorities or those above in society
Are making life difficult – perhaps even persecuting –
Then God cares about that and will reward your perseverance
In doing what is good and right and true.

God applauds those who are merciful and 'pure in heart' and working for peace...
Even if life isn't very easy for them at present.

God will turn the 'curse' into a 'blessing' ...
Making those who struggle for righteousness
blessed with strength to carry on.

I think people would have been glad to hear that God cares about them,
Even the 'little' people stuck in their everyday fishy jobs...

[Blessed are they...]

Meditation 2: Being Salty

The reading we've had today comes just after the Beatitudes –

These people who are 'blessed' through what some would consider 'cursed' situations
Are also being called, "the salt of the earth".

Prophecy – as 'salty' words – that might sting, but also heal...

I'm starting to wonder at this point -- in terms of 'salt' and 'light' –

If perhaps John the Baptist is perceived by Herod as being a bit too 'salty'
Or shedding too much 'light' on his personal business...

Salted fish – taste and preserving

I'm starting to wonder at this point -- in terms of 'salt' and 'light' –

If perhaps John the Baptist is perceived by Herod as being a bit too 'salty'
Or shedding too much 'light' on his personal business...

In our Bible studies, we're more accustomed to hearing passages

in which Jesus speaks of himself as 'I am',

But here Jesus is saying, 'You are...'

Not look just at me, but look at yourselves – as others will see you.

Not 'you will be some day', but 'you are...'

When you persevere in doing what you know is good and right and true,

You are being 'salt'.

You are adding 'taste' to life.

You are 'preserving' the goodness of life – the goodness of community.

Jesus speaks of people feeling they are being trampled on –

But still they are salt. Their witness is still important.

Jesus is saying to the folk trying to do their best in difficult circumstances:

You have worth. You are important.

Keep persevering in doing what is good and right and true.

That's how God's Kingdom of love and justice, and peace and joy, will prevail.

Meditation 3: Being Light

We've talked a bit about being salt --

 About that everyday item which adds taste

 And which preserves goodness --

We've talked about how Jesus tells we *are* salt,

 Especially when we're doing the things that promotes God's Kingdom

 Of justice and joy and peace.

I was also thinking about those Jesus says are to be 'a light to the nations' --

 Which we take to mean letting others see what we're doing --

 Whose light we're reflecting (God's light!)

But I've also been thinking about our brothers and sisters in lands

 Where it's dangerous to stand out... when it's dangerous to shine out.

It's been two years since the military coup took over in Myanmar --

 And the situation is still very difficult there for our Christian siblings --

February also marks one year since Putin invaded Ukraine --

 Also an extremely difficult time to stand up -- or out -- for what is right.

We know of situations in both where people have had to physically flee --

 Or to keep their light 'under a bushel', so to speak, just to survive.

Jesus would have known about something about fleeing for one's personal safety --

 Even as an infant, his parents fled with him to Egypt to escape infanticide...

 We've just heard the story that he fled from Nazareth when John was arrested...

When I spoke about Myanmar two years ago,

 About protestors were being arrested and beaten and imprisoned and killed,

We were all rightfully upset and angry at the time --

 And the news filled our ears and made our hearts cry out.

I spoke in the online service about how the military coup

 Coincided with the Lunar New Year

 And how people had taken to beating the New Year's drums

 Which traditionally banished the demons and dragons ...

 Speaking out... against injustice.

 Making their voices heard.

But then the military coup managed to control the internet as well,

 So it was much harder for information to get out.

Outside of Myanmar, we couldn't hear their voices,

 And soon we lost interest.

But the situation has not improved.

 I have heard first-hand from several in Myanmar over the past few weeks.

People are still regularly stopped and searched when they leave their homes for food.

 One has told me he must always take his phone with him when he goes out,

 But he must make sure that his phone is cleared before he leaves,

 Because chances are his phone will be checked,

 And any contacts he has made will be traced.

 And if he doesn't take his phone with him,

 He will also be challenged -- 'Why have you come out without a phone?'

 And he will then also probably be beaten...

He has friends who have been beaten, arrested, imprisoned... killed or disappeared.

Two years later, there is little relief from the tyranny.
Two years later, villages are still being burnt to the ground –
Churches are not exempt, in fact, sometimes they are targeted
Because they have spoken out –
Because they have dared to continue to believe
That goodness and justice and truth are important.
People are fleeing to other villages and towns –
Wherever they can find some safety...
Some are fleeing further – becoming refugees by whatever means they can afford.
The situation remains bleak.

Last February brought a new terror to the international scene
As Putin invaded Ukraine.
We have not been spared the images –
In fact, much of the success of this particular battle
Is that the Ukrainian leadership has used the public media to great effect –
To keep us all aware of the atrocities that continue...

Again, not just villages but whole cities have been burned, bombed,
Food and power and water and communications cut off,
And people have fled to safety –
Many to our own country –
Though currently our own county of Kent has declared it can't receive any more –
(Just recently a family from S London contacted Alfred and me to take them in,
But Kent County refused saying there is no space left for accommodation or schooling...)

Both these situations remind us of the upheaval in our world –
How we'd like to think that the problems are far away
So they don't really affect us –

The scriptures are clear, though:
God holds us all responsible for each other –
We are all our brothers' and sisters' keepers
And the responsibility for restoring and maintaining justice lies with us all.
In fact, those of us with more resources
Are also required to take more responsibility!
That was what was happening at the COP conference in Egypt in December
When the richer nations were approached to take on greater responsibility
For the plight of the poorer nations.
Again, we'd like to leave those problems to the others...
But in reality, we're all in this together.

When I was spoke with a friend from Myanmar a few weeks ago,
He told of how the military coup was led by a person who had studied in Russia –
How the Russians were blatantly funding and arming the military in Myanmar.
He spoke of his deep disappointment when other governments
Did not resist the Russian advances.
He felt a deep connection with the people of Ukraine,
And felt that their potential victory would be a victory for all.
Part of being the Body of Christ – with its world-wide connections

Is our responsibility to be the light for those whose wick is dimly burning.

Those of us who still have voices must continue to speak out,
must continue to call for repentance –
From our leaders, from our communities –
On behalf of those who cannot speak out
On those whose good works continue to be done only in the shadows.

Perhaps you're feeling a bit uneasy that I've ventured into world politics –
Is that what the Gospel is about?
In my eyes, it is – the way we live our lives in our private worlds,
In our neighbourhoods, in our church communities
Is our witness to the world.
It's our way of being salt – adding taste, preserving goodness to public and private life.
It's our way of being light – of showing how goodness can transform darkness.

I haven't heard recently from my friend in Myanmar recently –
Which probably means communication has become even more difficult for him.
But it also means that it's up to me – and up to you –
To keep shining the light on injustice.
To keep being salt – to keep doing the things that are good and right and true.
For such is the Kingdom of Heaven,
Which Jesus tells us is also God's Will for this earth as well.