



Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



5 February 2023

READINGS

Isaiah 58: 1-9a (9b-12); Psalm 112: 1-12; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-12 (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20

hear the voice of our Saviour

Good morning, and may God bless us as we try to hear the voice of our Saviour through the noise of our every day life. May we learn to love him even more.

A member of my family has moved up the ranks and has done fairly well for himself in the field of marketing. As a result, he is often called upon to speak in various motivational conferences, and a year or two ago, he was asked to be interviewed on a podcast put out by a pastor who was, at the time, trying to encourage Christian businesses through a difficult time, and he felt his ministry was to help build up sound, Christian commerce. Some of the marketing “secrets” were not what you think the selling business is all about, and today’s reading reminded me of this podcast. It is also true that in the post-Covid world we are looking to build up our churches again, and if nothing else, we have had it forcibly brought to our attention that a lot of what has served the church for years is no longer that effective. There’s no reason not to make use of what science, business and psychology has taught us, so let’s see how God will use these insights through the interpretation of today’s scripture. I think, too we shall see that the incarnational approach – God coming down into our world to be with us, is a pattern which is God - given, and the marketing world has found it and uses it in its own area – sometimes, to be honest, with more success than the church has allowed Jesus to be.

That doesn’t mean that the Bible has become irrelevant. Jesus said in today’s Gospel that he has not come to change any aspect of the Jewish Law, but there is no doubt Jesus interpreted the law in such a way that the people flocked to hear him. He also spoke to the people in language and with idioms they could understand. So what can modern marketing tell us, how can it help us, and how is it reflected in today’s scripture readings?

I think the first point comes from the letter of Paul to the Corinthians. To market something well, you need to know what it is that is unique to your “product” as it were. In this case, it’s about Jesus and the belief system growing up around him. You cannot put Christianity out there with all the other religious, esoteric, philosophical, psychological and other such beliefs and expect people to find you. You need to know exactly what it is you believe, and have the conviction to say so. Paul, in today’s epistle does exactly that. He says that his message is about the power, the wisdom and the glory of God and it is proclaimed through the Holy Spirit. Paul knows in whom he believes, and his relationship with God in Christ is a personal one, and one which he never tires of communicating. He doesn’t only know his message, he also knows his Saviour, intimately and he presents Christ crucified and risen again to all those

to whom he preaches. There is no chance that Paul's message will be lost in the maelstrom of beautiful thought that clutters up the first century equivalent of the social media.

Secondly, good marketing depends on selling a product that is of good quality, is reliable and the buyers have built up a trust in the product. You need to know that if you like a certain brand of jam, you can go anywhere in the country and where that brand is sold, you will find the same stuff in the tin that you found last time you bought it. If a careless shopkeeper lets the tins fall and the cans dent and the jam is compromised, it spoils the reputation of the brand, and if that happens, very often the manufacturer will have to get involved. Our Christian message is what God meant it to be – the source of salvation for the whole world, and Jesus was not about the change its origin, the Law. The words of the prophet Isaiah are about condemning the people of Israel for breaking the law, for living wickedly and God is justifiably angry and says so through the words of the prophet. What God meant for the world is being spoilt by the people who are meant to be living this law, and God is justifiably angry.

Some marketing is no more than cheap salesmanship. We have all been victims of the hard sell, where we have been bullied into buying what we don't want, and we make sure we never go there again. We also know that a product like a can of alcohol or a lipstick can promise happiness and a changed life, and it probably delivers, for a day or so. Then we are back to where we were before. Good marketing listens to the people it trying to sell to, and a good company will pay attention to market research. We know of fast, junk food outlets who suddenly start adding salad to their menu. They have listened. People are wanting to eat more healthily. I see you can now buy vegan shoes. Manufacturers are listening. Any manufacturer wants to make money and most would prefer to do it honestly and he or she will steer his or her business towards meeting those needs which a good marketer will make sure the company knows, and the marketer instructs the advertiser accordingly so people know where to go to get whatever it is that will fulfil that particular need.

So if Jesus is saying put your lamp on a lampstand, what is he saying? He saying two things. If the light of the Gospel is out in the open, it shines light into the darkness so the purveyors of that light can see what is going on and can provide for those needs. Sitting in a basement having a cosy little Bible study has its uses, but by itself it won't light up the world. The other reason for putting the lamp on a lampstand is so that everyone can see who and what the Gospel is. If we do the other things – know our gospel, live it openly, honestly and ethically in a dedicated way, it becomes an option for the many who are looking for a way out of the confusion, loneliness and fearfulness of our post-Covid, climate-threatened world.

And the salt metaphor – I know the world salt comes from the Latin word "sal" which is also the base of the word for salary, and in a world without fridges, salt was essential for preservation of food (maybe in these post-Eskom days we could learn a thing or two from the ancients). That is how important it was in that world. I presume in the pre-scientific era, what was used for "salt" was not pure sodium chloride, which is extremely stable after being purified as it is these days, and therefore could more easily be contaminated and lose its efficacy. The salt around the Dead Sea apparently has so many minerals in it, it eventually breaks down the salt and it becomes useless. To put Jesus' teaching in a modern context, if you took a gravy from a good meal, evaporated all the water, you would have a salty-tasting powder, but it would be useless as a preservative if you wanted to make biltong, even if the salt in it would affect your blood-pressure.

If we are to be effective as Christians, we must know in whom we believe. That doesn't necessarily mean the religious talk that is so off-putting from some of our more enthusiastic Pentecostal friends, but it does mean that we are so solidly reliable in our faith that people will watch you. They'll follow your lead as to

when to stop drinking at a party. They will allow their children to go to a party or out to a Mall if you allow yours to. (and your children will hate you for that!). You will become the spirit level for the walls of your society, and will be relied upon always to do the right thing. A predictable, reliable, efficacious salt. No pressure!

A final word from the marketing world. One, big advertisement, be it a fancy video in an ad break on TV, or a full page in a newspaper, will not have the effect that lots and lots of little ads, all over the place, all the time. If I were to ask you how many ads have you seen of your favourite supermarket, you wouldn't be able to tell me, but every YouTube clip, every computer game, every bill board, every weather report, every soap opera, every sports game you have watched, every shopping bag, magazine in the dentist's waiting room, every rubbish bin, every bus, has told you again and again where to shop. And you are listening, and you have responded with your purse or wallet and you don't even know it. Big events, like Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, the outreach of Gift of the Givers, and the equivalent generosity from Christian organisations, Red Cross, and other such are useful in bringing the goodness of God of all religions, including Christianity, to the attention of the world. But it's the little day-to-day Jesus events and Jesus words and Jesus attitudes which will do the job. That is well within our reach, so let's do it! Let's soak our country in Jesus by our deeds, by our love, and by our persistence. We are the salt of the world. Jesus said so, and we work as Paul did, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen