

May our light shine ...

... and our lamps be filled

A sermon given on the Third Sunday before Lent, 5th February 2023 – by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 5:13-20

It's been interesting pondering these readings this week, because two things have happened that have made me think about them. First of all, as many of you know, we will be moving in about a month and so we've started that dreaded thing of going through the cupboards so that we're not unnecessarily carrying stuff that we haven't touched since we arrived five years ago to another place to remain untouched, probably forever. And that has included quite a few interesting things in the food cupboard. And I'm a great one for, you know, best before rather than than whatever, but it's true that some of the spices really aren't going to make any difference at all, having been there probably since before we were married. And so, reluctantly, we have dropped a few things into the recycling. And then secondly, my middle niece is a student studying probably the best degree in the world, which is outdoor adventure activity. And so she's going to get a degree for surfing, for canoeing, for climbing. She loves it. And currently she's studying in Lanzarote. Oh, yes, it's 22 degrees. She got burnt this week and she sent me a message and I said, what did you do today, Bethy? Are you having fun? Oh, yes, Auntie Wendy. She said, we walked one and a half miles into a lava tunnel, Lanzarote being famous for its volcanic geography. And I said, what was that like? She said it was brilliant. We got into the middle and we all turned our head torches off. I've never seen darkness like it. It was amazing. And of course, darkness, when we choose it, when it's part of an adventure with a group of friends, is an incredible thing. But if they all suddenly realise that their torch batteries had failed and none of them had a head torch to get them back out again, she might not have been sending me any texts at all, and certainly they wouldn't have been quite so cheery. Head torches don't light up a huge area, but in the pitch black, they are a lifeline in the same as spices aren't our core foods. That's where they can get pushed to the back of a cupboard. But they do bring food to life. They make it distinctive and desirable.

And in our reading this morning, Jesus is challenging his followers to allow their faith to make a difference in the world. His teaching, if followed, invited people to live counter to the cultural norm, to be that distinctive and desirable presence wherever they went. And those early followers of Jesus had seen a living demonstration of what it meant to heal the sick; to cast out demons; to set the prisoners free; to preach the good news. And they'd

listen to Jesus teaching that the first will be last and the last first; that you should love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; that you should forgive others as you've been forgiven and love your neighbour as yourself.

And if we had heard the Old Testament greeting that is set for this morning, it comes from the Book of Isaiah, and it speaks of what God declares is an acceptable way of living, an acceptable fast for him. It says, *"Is this not the fast that I chose - to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" [Isa 58:6-7]*

Shining a light, a lamp or a head torch doesn't mean you have to be a shiny person. It doesn't mean you have to be in the spotlight or up the front. It doesn't even mean you're expected to shout about your faith on a street corner. It doesn't mean looking a certain way or having particular skills. What's amazing about a torch or a lamp is actually you don't see the person holding it at all in the darkness. You just see the next few steps. Letting your light shine means using whatever you have for the benefit of others, for the expansion of God's kingdom, for the next few steps. Salt or spice is invisible within a meal, but its impact is experienced by everyone. Just ask my husband about chilli powder and what that does to him. I imagine very few people here have any idea who came in and hoovered and polished this place this week, so that when we came to worship, it was beautiful. I have no idea who harvested the tea or coffee that I just drank over in the parish hall, but it changed my hot water into something delightful. Most of us don't know what happens to the money that we have put in the collection this morning or given online, but some of it will travel around the world supporting others. Some of it will benefit churches in deprived areas. And yes, some of it will pay for the toilet rolls. Like the yeast in the bread, all our actions have the potential to ripple out and to make a huge difference to someone else. Jesus didn't expect his followers to keep their faith hidden and private, but to be living and active. Each of us will be able to shine light into different situations using the gifts and skills that we've been given, whether praying or speaking or taking practical action, listening or walking alongside someone.

But we are approaching the season of Lent, a time when we are invited to pause and to reflect. And I think it's really important to remember that when Jesus spoke to his hearers about lanterns and salt, everybody would have known that none of them had a very long shelf life unless they were trimmed and refilled and cared for or replaced. And I know many of you here, and most of us are keen and quick to get involved and to try and make

a difference wherever or whenever we can. But perhaps a greater challenge, if only to myself, is to allow ourselves to stop and to recharge, to recognise when our light has grown dim or our flavour has been washed away by the cares and challenges of life. Sometimes we need to allow the light of others to shine more brightly and to have ours 'on charge'. We all know that there are times when we need to be carried by the love and actions of others. And that is all part of how God's kingdom works. Tom said to me this week that his favourite description of Lent is 'an invitation to waste time with God.' And I would argue that pressing pause and refocusing on God, recharging in His light, listening to Jesus is, in fact, never wasted time. But instead, as the Isaiah passage concludes, *"The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in the parched places. He'll make your bones strong. You'll be like a watered garden, a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of the Streets to live in."* [Isa 58:11-12]

So may our light shine and may our lamps be filled.

Reading Text

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ *'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. ¹⁴ 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.*

¹⁷ *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*