

## **THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS (Part 1)**

### **THE SYNOD SERMON**

(Thursday evening – 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2001)  
Christ Church Cathedral

## **A CALL TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

**Matthew 5:13-16**

**In the name of the Living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **A Suffering World**

As I sat down to prepare this address, the news had just broken about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and I felt constrained to change the direction of this sermon.

0.1 One might debate about why the world virtually came to a standstill when this horrific act of violence against innocent people happened. Was it because it was directed against the U.S., the most powerful nation in the world? Was it because it struck against the heartland of capitalism and democracy? Why was it we sat glued to the TV or radio as report upon report shocked us to the core? We will never forget that day with its graphic images, grateful that we live in an insignificant country in the south Pacific.

But even worse horrors, at least in terms of loss of life and a nation's ability to remain hopeful, have happened in recent years without raising international furor or even touching our emotions. Almost a third of the population of Cambodia lost its life under the dictator Pol Pot. Two million have died in southern Sudan over the past decade. More than one million children have been exploited in the sex trade of South East Asia – and much more – and we hardly shed a tear or donate a dollar to alleviate such tragedy! It makes one think.

#### **Can Society be Changed?**

Which brings me to this different tack. Let me begin with a question. I wonder if you think it possible for human society to be changed and to be made more pleasing to God? Of course we all know that human beings can be changed. As Christians we claim that we ourselves have been changed by the grace of God – don't we? We know the power of the Christian Gospel to change individual people. But can society be changed?

In the light of the evil we see in the world around us globally, we don't appear to be getting any better. Some of us even have questions about society here in Aotearoa – New Zealand.

Can society really be changed? Its consensus on moral questions, its view of marriage and the family, its attitude to human life and its sanctity, including the unborn and the senile. Think of the administration of justice, the education of young people, the treatment of the unemployed – of men, women and children who are trapped in the cycle of deprivation and poverty. Think of our record of human rights particularly in relation to minorities and the stewardship of our environment. It's these things and others that make up our national culture today. And at the heart of every culture there lies an ideology, a set of values, meanings, goals, and ideals.

I ask myself this evening as we begin our Synod – is it possible for the values and standards of Jesus Christ to prevail in our culture, so that society becomes God honouring?

Let me declare at once I believe it is possible. And not only is it possible, I believe it is the will and purpose of God for this to happen. If I had to give a title to this address it would be, "a call to change the world". Tomorrow morning in the continuation of this address I will be bold enough to add the words, "through the local church" – a call to change the world through the local church.

### **"Salt" and "Light"**

You will have heard those familiar metaphors of Jesus, "salt" and "light" in our reading from Matthew chapter 5. In the preceding verses, which we didn't read this evening, but which we know so well as the Beatitudes, we see a personal call to be transformed.

Tonight, I want us to consider the startling fact that through his transformed people, the Church, it is also possible for society to be transformed: to become more just, more gentle, more free, more compassionate – in other words more pleasing to the living God.

Some of us here tonight may not believe that, or at least have difficulty in the face of the evidence to accept that possibility. Listen again to these words of Jesus, "you are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). All of us are very familiar with salt and light. They are two very common household commodities. They are found in virtually every home throughout the world and they were also very common in Jesus day.

As a boy in his Nazareth home he must have often watched his mother use salt in the kitchen because in those days, before refrigeration, salt was the commonest preservative and antiseptic known. Jesus would have watched his mother Mary rub salt into the meat and fish or allow them to soak in brine, in order to preserve them from bacterial decay.

He would also have watched his mother light the oil lamps when the sun went down.

Salt and light are the images or metaphors that our Lord Jesus himself chose in order to indicate the influence he wanted his followers to exert in society. That's very obvious from the passage. He calls his followers "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth". But what did he mean? What was Jesus talking about?

## **CALL TO THE CHURCH**

I want to suggest that Jesus was teaching us three truths. He was calling his followers, the Church, to be – radically different – to penetrate society – to influence the world.

### **To be Radically Different**

Christians are radically different from non-Christians because this passage of Scripture (Matthew 5:13-16) sets the two communities – the Christian and the non-Christian, the redeemed and the unredeemed, the followers of Jesus and those who do not follow Him – over and against each other in radical contrast. We may not like that, but an honest reading of these verses shows us that fact.

On the one hand there is the world, which is, with all its evil and tragedy, a dark place. But, on the other, there is you, who, individually and collectively, are to be the dark world's light. You and the world are set opposite each other as different as light from darkness.

Again on the one hand, there is the world, which is rather like decaying fish or meat that has gone off, because of its social decay, and on the other hand there is you, who are to be decaying society's salt.

So in the New Testament, Christian and non-Christian communities are set over and against each other; as radically distinct from one another as light from darkness and as salt from decay. Whether we like it or not, or, accept it or not, that assessment is a major theme of the whole bible.

God is calling out people for himself – a new community, a messianic community, the community of Jesus Christ. From the world he's calling out a people to be his own and the vocation of this new community is to be holy. God says, "you shall be holy because I am holy" – in other words it is a call to be different. It's not a negative thing; it's a very positive thing – to be Christ-like, which is what holiness is.

Matthew 6:8 puts it this way, "do not be like them" – in other words don't follow the example of the people around you. Don't conform to the world or society in which you live, be different – be Christ-like. Christians are radically different or, if they are not, then they ought to be because that is what we are called to be. How do we measure up?

There may be difficulty in living that out. It may cause discomfort. However, there is no difficulty in understanding that the call of Jesus is to be different. If Jesus calls us to be "salt" and "light" to society, he meant that we are to be radically different.

### **To Penetrate Society**

Secondly, Jesus must also have meant that Christians are to penetrate non-Christian society. Because although we are to be morally and spiritually distinct we are not to be socially segregated from the community in which we live.

On the contrary he said, “Let your light shine” – let it penetrate into the darkness. “Don’t put your lamp under a bed or a bucket or in a cupboard – don’t hide your light” but rather set your light on a lamp stand that it might give light to the house. Let the light shine – let it penetrate.

It’s the same with the salt. The salt has to be rubbed into the meat. It has to soak into the fish otherwise it will do no good. Light and salt are both penetrating commodities, they are distinct from the environment around them but they are to penetrate that environment. The lamp does no good if we keep it in a cupboard and the salt does no good if it stays in the saltshaker. The light has to shine into the darkness and the salt has to soak into the meat.

But the big question is this, as Christians, do we do that? The tragedy is that so many of us who claim to follow Jesus stay in our little cupboards, in our elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars, instead of getting rubbed into the community. That’s where we belong – or have I got that wrong? We are called to be a missionary church – a missionary people!

Of course it’s good to come to church but that must not be our only destination as Christians. If we come to church to enjoy congenial fellowship with one another in the worship of God on the Lord’s Day, then from Monday to Saturday we’re out, or should be, in the world! That’s our place, that’s where Jesus came – into the world – and that’s where he sends us.

So firstly – Christians are radically different from non-Christians.  
Secondly – Christians are to penetrate non-Christian society, and  
Thirdly – Christians can influence and change society.

### **To Influence Society**

Listen, the salt does not salt itself, it salts the environment in which it is placed. The light does not enlighten itself. It’s to light the area in which it is placed.

Both salt and light are effective commodities and they both change the environment in which they are placed. If you put salt on fish or meat something happens – the bacterial decay is hindered. If you switch on the light, something happens – the darkness is dispelled. So I ask myself, why is it that we don’t, as Christians and as churches, have a greater effect on our community, in our society, in our country and our world?

Look at the prevailing trends around us in New Zealand. Think of social injustice and racial disadvantage, the continuing evil of unemployment, the violence on our streets, on the rugby field and in our homes. Think of selfish, covetous materialism, corruption in high places, the breakdown of marriage and the family. Think of sexual promiscuity, the abuse of women and children, the disregard for the sanctity of human life and so on.

### **WHO’S TO BLAME ?**

Who is to blame for the deterioration of standards in society? Our habit is of course to blame everybody but ourselves. I want to suggest solemnly to you this evening that if

society is decaying, it could well be our fault. Are we endeavouring to penetrate our society, or, stand aloof from it?

Let me put it to you another way. If the house is dark at night, there's absolutely no sense in blaming the house for the darkness. That's what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is this, "where is the light?" If the meat goes bad and becomes inedible, there's no sense in blaming the meat for its decay. That's what happens when bacteria are allowed to breed unchecked. The question to ask is, "where is the salt?"

If society becomes corrupt or unsafe, like a dark night or a stinking fish, there's no sense in blaming society for its corruption. That's what happens when human evil is unrestrained. The question to ask is, "where is the Church? – where is the salt and light of Jesus?" Why aren't we dispelling the darkness and hindering the decay?

It's hypocritical of us to raise our eyebrows, shrug our shoulders and wring our hands and blame society. Jesus told us, you and me – the Church – to be the salt and the light of society. So if rottenness and darkness abound, it is at the least partly our fault – we have to accept a measure of that blame. Then with fresh determination we have to accept the role that Jesus has given us to be the salt and the light of the world.

I say once again, it isn't only individuals that can be changed, if I understand Scripture at all and if I understand what Jesus is saying, society can be changed!

I am not saying that we can be a perfect, faultless society – we cannot. We are not utopians, we are not starry-eyed idealists, we know all about human weakness, failure and depravity and how it is engrained in human-beings and societies. The world will not be perfected until Jesus Christ returns, if I am reading Scripture correctly. Then, we are told there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. But that perfection awaits the return of Christ. However, the fact that we cannot perfect society does not mean that we can't improve it.

It can be improved! History is full of examples of the social uplift that has come to a community as a result of the influence of Christ through his followers. Think of the rising standards of health and hygiene throughout the world over recent centuries, the increasing availability of education, the greater respect for women and children, improved conditions in factories, mines and prisons, the abolition of slavery and the slave trade and many other things. To whom are those improvements due? It's an over simplification I know, but they would never have started and they are due, more than anything else, to the influence of Christ through his people the Church, improving, sweetening and reforming society.

## **HOW CAN WE BE MORE EFFECTIVE?**

You must be asking the question by now, "Yes – but how does social change take place?" How can we, as local churches, as Christians, become more effectively salt, hindering decay in society? How can we more effectively be light in our communities?

I want to suggest one or two of the weapons or means we have at our disposal, if only we would use them.

### **Prayer**

I beg you not to dismiss the first one as merely a pious platitude, because our first weapon is prayer and we don't use it as we should. You believe as I do, I hope, that God hears and answers prayer – doesn't he? We are commanded in the New Testament to pray for the nations and to pray for the leaders of nations and communities. "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness". In other words, that justice and peace may reign in our communities – our society. That is the will of God we are told. (1 Timothy 2:1&2) But do we take that seriously?

I sometimes ask myself if the slow progress in securing justice for the oppressed, in reaching a world with the love of God, in evangelism, in securing peace in the violent places of planet earth, is not due more than anything else to the prayerlessness of the people of God. We must take intercession more seriously, both privately in our own devotions and publicly when we come together in our local churches as we bow down and do business with God and seek to lay hold of him for the world he loves. We need to pray, to intercede, that God will intervene and cause his will to be done. Both scripture and history are full of challenging examples to encourage us. Will we listen?

### **Evangelism**

Our second weapon is evangelism, which we will look at in more detail tomorrow. I wonder if we recognize sufficiently that evangelism has an indispensable place in social action and the improvement of society. Let me put it like this, Christian social action is impossible without socially active Christians. And socially active Christians emerge out of evangelism – the sharing of the Good News. It is when people are really born anew by the Spirit of God that he gives them a tender social conscience. It is a mark of being a genuine Christian. We become dissatisfied with the status quo – with its injustices and inequalities. We become determined for change through the power and the love of God.

So at our disposal we have prayer, evangelism and thirdly, and this may surprise you – argument or persuasion.

### **Persuasion**

In the end, unjust social situations in our communities and in our world can only be changed by legislation. But we must also remember that legislation cannot make "bad" people "good". It's the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that changes people. But legislation can reduce evil in society and so make it more pleasing to God and a better place for all.

Martin Luther King put it well, he said, "morality cannot be legislated – but behaviour can be regulated. Laws may not change the heart – but they can restrict the heartless. The law cannot make an employer love me – but it can keep him from refusing to hire me because of the colour of my skin." That is the place of law in making society pleasing to God and you will find this strongly emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments. However, in a democracy, legislation depends on consent. We know that democracy is government with the consent of the people, but if legislation depends on consent, then

consent depends on consensus, and consensus is another word for public opinion. And public opinion depends on argument and persuasion.

It's for that reason that it's absolutely essential for Christians to get into public debate – to argue in the places where decisions are made – to insist that the moral laws of God are actually for the public good and not only just good for Christians. We need to remember again that in the book of Deuteronomy God refers to his laws as being, “for your good always.”

We must demonstrate and show that the laws of God are not meant to crush society – the laws of God are meant to liberate society. They are for the common good, but we need Christians who are skilled ethical and social apologists to get into the argument for example; about the sanctity of human life, the importance of the stability of married life, of monogamy and standards of sexual conduct, of having one day off in seven, of compassionate economics, of the rights of children and so on. The laws of God have much to say about these things, which are for the good of all people, and we have to argue that. We need committed Christians in politics, on local councils and in the social life of any community. This is the task of Christians, the people of God. Then action can take place in changing society and making it a better place for all.

## **A FRESH VISION**

Don't underestimate the influence of the Christian minority in any community or country. Let me quote from an article I read recently by sociologist Robert Bellar, a committed Christian and an Episcopalian. He's known for his book, *Habits of the Heart*. He says, “I think that we should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a new vision of a just and gentle world”.

He goes on to say, “In Japan a very small minority of Christians introduced ethics into politics and had an impact beyond all proportion to their numbers. They were central in the beginning of the women's movement, labour unions and virtually every reform movement.” He then said this remarkable thing, “the quality of a culture can be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision.”

If God could give a new vision of what your local church could be, what your community could be, what our society could be, what our nation could be, I believe society could be changed to be more pleasing to God and better for everyone. If only two percent of us had a fresh vision – and we're more than that in New Zealand – we could have a far greater influence as the “salt” and “light” of the world than we have at the present moment.

Let me bring this to a close. I suggested that there are three major implications of Jesus' statement to be “light” and “salt” to the world – three truths for all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus.

1. That Christians are radically different from non-Christians as salt is from decay and as light is from darkness.
2. That we have to penetrate society for Christ as the salt penetrates the meat and as the light penetrates the darkness.

3. That we can influence and change society – as the salt and as the light change the environment in which they are placed.

The conclusion is this – those three things belong together. We must never separate them from each other. The first two – that Christians are radically different from non-Christians and that we have to penetrate the society in which we live – lead up to the third, that we can influence and change society. But the third – that society can be changed – is absolutely impossible without the first two.

So if we ask the question, “how can we change the world?” The answer, only if we, ourselves are manifestly different from the world, and only if we penetrate that world for Christ. We cannot change the world if we retain our Christian distinctives but remain aloof from the world and do not penetrate it. And we cannot change the world if we penetrate it but lose our Christian distinctives. Both together are necessary.

The local church must penetrate the society in which it lives, challenging it and confronting it where necessary and not conforming to it. The salt must retain its saltiness otherwise it’s useless and the light has to shine, it has to retain its brightness. The saltiness of the salt and the brightness of the light are exactly what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount.

The major failure of the church has always been either withdrawal from the world into monastic seclusion (and there are plenty of churches like that, whatever their labels), or, conformity to the world – to its values and standards. If we withdraw from the world we cannot influence it. If we conform to the world we cannot influence it. We must retain our biblical distinctives – our values, convictions and standards – while at the same time penetrating and influencing the world for Christ.

If only we could be what Jesus said we were to be – salt and light to the world. If only we could combine this distinctness and this penetration – this separation from the standards and values of the world and this involvement in the life of the world. This is the combination that the metaphors of salt and light lay upon us and that gives us hope for our communities.

### **We can do it.**

We stand at the thresh-hold. Will we turn ourselves inside out? Will we become outward focused facing the community instead of always looking at what we want – putting ourselves first? Can we become a church for others?

Some of us may need to repent of our introverted view of the church and its mission. Some of us may need to repent of our pessimism. Pessimism is incompatible with faith in God.

Society can be changed by the Gospel and by the people of God who are willing to penetrate society with the Good News. We can have a far greater influence for Christ than we have even begun to dream.

May God make us and our churches salt and light to the society in which we live and to a world in need.