

Isaiah 58.1-12

1 Corinthians 2. 1-16

Matthew 5. 13-20

During the long COVID lockdowns here in Melbourne many people took on major new interests or projects. Some people learnt to make sourdough bread; some people started making podcasts; Geoff Deason told me that to wile away the hours and days and weeks, he started to catalogue and turn into books, all of Dorothy's photos from their trips away over a forty year period. Thousands of them. The Rev. Dr Sally Douglas, minister at Richmond Uniting Church, decided to write a book. She entitled it *The Church Triumphant*. And then she scribbled out Triumphant and wrote *The Church As Salt: Becoming the Community Jesus Speaks About*. Sally draws the inspiration for this little book from today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount. *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 underfoot.*

For the past six decades, most of the course of my life, the church has been in numerical decline. And this narrative of decline has become our dominant story about ourselves. We tell ourselves this story and the media tells us each time new census figures are released the percentage drop in attendance since the last census. We are a church in decline; O, we are an ageing congregation. As if we are aging more rapidly than anyone else. This narrative of decline has become a kind of self-flagellation, a narrative of self-recrimination. In a society where the narrative is growth, growth, growth we seem to be unable to participate in the upward progress.

The Canadian mission specialist Alan Roxburgh, in a controversial suggestion, says that this contraction of the church in the Western world is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. That God is at work refining the church through this contraction. It may seem an outrageous idea that for all our church-growth programs and self-congratulatory stories of success from the post-war years we are actually being brought undone by the Spirit; and refined. It is God's work. And while this might seem an outrageous suggestion, it is a suggestion entirely consistent with the witness of scripture that God builds up and tears down. The flow of the reading from Isaiah today reminds us of how easily we lose our way.

So, in her book *The Church as Salt*, Sally Douglas suggests in the contraction of the church we are being called to face our deceptions and our collaborations with the powers of empire and culture. In this pithy little book Sally invites us to stop and take a good hard look at ourselves – something we have all had to do through COVID - and at who Jesus calls us to be as the church. Such a process of self-reflection is never an easy process, either to do it intentionally or if we are forced by circumstances to do it. For those of us who have remained in the church and seek a future for it are in many ways are slowly but surely being forced to do this.

Sally works with the metaphor of salt and reminds us that if salt has lost its taste, it is thrown out. Truth is that salt doesn't lose its taste but if it becomes tainted with other things it is only good to be thrown out. The church of Christendom has come to expect that it is the whole dish, not the flavouring. The church as the social club is dying; the church as the purity police is dying. Is it that we have lost our tastiness? And we are being provoked to rediscover our roots, our essence, our source in God and in the way of Jesus.

In working with the metaphor of salt, Sally reminds us of how salt is an utterly essential part of human experience. She writes of the saltiness of tears; she writes of dark, salty wombs; she writes of salt as a preserver; of salt as seasoning and she writes of our salty sweat. There has been something about the church which shaped too many of us which led us to

be ashamed of the human experience – of tears, of the visceralness of birth and the passion that leads to the making of babies, of the sweat of human labour. Horses sweat, men perspire, ladies glow my mother used to facetiously say. But when we talk of the incarnation of God in Jesus we somehow gloss over his own sweat and tears – somehow imagining he didn't experience these things - and as his followers, neither should we. The incarnation is an invitation to us to allow this degraded view of our humanity – the saltiness of our humanity – to be redeemed. To come to know that God is present in our struggles; most present in them. As Paul writes, when I am weak, then I am strong.

I am aware that some of you are in groups where you gather on a regular basis – and have for years – and you share your lives together, your joys and your struggles. You allow the saltiness of your tears to be seen by others; to not to quickly try to mop them up or wash them away. You look on each other with eyes of mercy. What you do for each other is grant each other the divine gaze.

When I came amongst you, I could sense this. That you know each other, not just in a superficial way like in too many churches, but that many of you truly travel at depth with each other. In this way you are gift to each other. As the hymn *brother sister let me serve you* goes: *I will bear the Christ light for you, in the night time of your fear*. This level of spiritual intimacy is redemptive; it is life giving. When we find ourselves in places of darkness and someone holds the Christ-light for us this is healing and wholemaking. When we find ourselves without hope, someone hopes for us; this is gift of the spirit.

I have come to the conclusion that we have worried too much about the future of the church; worried about the success or relevance of the church. Understandably, those of us who have been in the church most of our lives, have found it difficult to reimagine what it means to be church in this changed time, because we told ourselves back there in the 50s and 60s that we had arrived, that we were successful, that we were blessed by God. Only to have it all slowly but steadily slip away.

The difficulty for us is that that past era is our reference point; our measure of what a successful, worthy church looks like. But as Mother Theresa said: *God doesn't want us to be successful, just faithful*. What we are simply called to do is to be the church. Each of us personally needs to seek to do this and as communities, organic communities, which we understand to be uniquely gifted by the spirit, to discern the character of our giftedness and to treat this giftedness as the divine gift that it is, and shape congregational life accordingly. The truth is that as Paul writes to the Corinthians, encouraging them to live the life of the spirit, he is not expecting that they will be in the majority. His encouragement is not to operate by the wisdom of the age or be successful in its terms, but to pursue the way of poverty we heard Jesus speak of last week in the beatitudes. This is the key to being the church. We have to attend to these things first. And the spirit will then enable us to bear fruit.

The period of a ministerial vacancy is a time of anxiety for a congregation. Sometimes I have seen everything grind to a halt; *we should wait until the new minister comes*, goes the mantra. This anxiety I sense is propelled by a concern about what will become of us. What will the future hold? I think you can celebrate that you are in good heart; that you are seeking to be the church in this time – in spite of all the questions and doubts about the future – and rest in the sense that God is with you. This in between time is a time for looking for signs of God's Spirit at work in you and for inklings of what and who you are called to be. May God grant you grace and insight as you do this.

Andrew Boyle