**Proper 1, 5 February 2017**

**Readings:**

Isaiah 58.1-12

Matthew 5. 13-20

I’ve found in life that in times of crisis there are books, pieces of music of films

to which I return, things that we know will see us through dark times. (Just as we have comfort foods, so there are also comfort books, or films.) The book I find myself returning to on these occasions is ‘The Lord of the Rings’.

In that book there is a conversation between the Hobbit, Frodo, and Gandalf the wizard. They are discussing the task that Frodo must undertake, to take the great ring of power in Frodo’s possession, and destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom, many perilous miles away: *“I wish it need not have happened in my time,"* said Frodo. *"So do I,"* said Gandalf, *"and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do* *with the time that is given us.”*

We live in interesting times, in dark troubling, frightening and uncertain times. Times that question the truth. Of how we should treat strangers, or those with beliefs different to our own; to welcome them, or turn them away with travel bans and walls. And the big question for us, the Church is, how are we as the people of God to respond? Do we hunker down with one of our go-to books or films and wait for the storm to pass us by? Or is there another way?

In answer to this question, Jesus and the Prophet Isaiah call us to action.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells his listeners that they are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. That is people who bring something different, something special into the world – something that changes the way we see and experience things, as both salt and light do. Today’s Gospel reading is a call to be people whose actions and words bring something of God’s presence and love to the world.

Our Gospel reading comes just at the end of the Beatitudes, Jesus’s great ‘Blessed are you’ statements:

Blessed are you who are poor in spirit;

Blessed are those who are persecuted, who are peacemakers; who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

They are statements that talk about how we are to live as God’s children. He is telling his listeners that if they live out the life of the Beatitudes, then they will be like salt and light, making a difference in the world.But how can we do this? How can we be salt and light?

Today’s reading from Isaiah gives us the pattern:

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them […] ?*

The point Jesus is making is that being is not about merely being nice to other people. He tells his disciples and us, that our righteousness is to outdo even that of the Scribes and Pharisees. That we are to go above and beyond what society expects of us. We are to live lives that aren’t just about fulfilling what our families, friends and society expect of us, but to live lives that make a real difference to those around us.

Christianity is not about merely being nice, it’s about living lives that transform the world around us. Lives that make the world a better place. And this is difficult. I know just how difficult this is, because I fall down on this, every day; my day is littered with failed good intentions. No, we can’t do this on our own, rather it’s about our encouraging one another to be light and salt it’s something we work together on.

In being light and salt we will be standing together against the blandness and the darkness that so trouble our world at the moment.

Now you may be wondering what I mean by blandness. It’s blandness that says in each of our minds that: *‘it’s okay for us to do that (whether it’s torture, execution or travel bans) if it protects us, our interests of our security; and of course it will only affect bad people’.* There’s a darkness which hides behind that blandness: a darkness that quietly takes away the liberties of minorities, before then removing the liberties of everyone else, ourselves included.

That tells us it’s okay, because it doesn’t affect us. To be light and salt means to stand against that blandness and darkness.

But there’s hope. Jesus’s call to be salt and light, and these are represented for us today in the candle that was given to us at our Baptisms, and again when we say the words: *‘shine as a light in the world,* t*o the glory of God the Father’.* The Baptismal candle is a reminder of our call to be light and salt in the world.

I began this sermon by talking about one of my favourite books, The Lord of the Rings, and Frodo’s conversation with Gandalf, where he wishes that his own age weren’t so dark, so troubled, so evil. I too wish that the darkness and blandness had not come into the world in our own time; how I wish that I were living in a happier, more carefree age.

But we are not living in such a carefree age, and we cannot escape from our responsibilities to be salt and light, to shine as lights in the world; it’s what stands at the heart of our Baptisms.

Today’s Gospel reading, and the reading from Isiah are a call, telling us how we are to respond to the darkness of our age. That we are to care for the oppressed, the hungry and all who are in need. And in doing these things, we are following Christ’s call to be salt and light in the world.