

**REFLECTION: SALT AND LIGHT... TODAY?  
5 FEBRUARY 2023**

**By Rev. Doug Lendrum**

Much debate and discussion has taken place over the years as to what is the role of the church. And by church I mean that in a universal sense. The 'church' that we find in the local expression often called a congregation. We note that like most businesses, organisations and human institutions we as the church always seem to be in the middle of one of those discussions about the future. And they are always discussions about restructuring... Always it seems!

As far as the church goes it seems that many of us feel all this restructuring talk will enable our Church, Congregation or Faith Community to more resemble the kingdom or realm of God of which Jesus spoke about. We tend to forget that it is an alternative way of being from that which we might assume is better or perfect, or efficient.

What we invariably get caught up in is the causes have more to do with dwindling resources, an outdated theology, and the rate of change in the world. Like climate change issues we scramble with what we think is a better way of doing things rather than seek an alternative way of being. It seems that we don't really want to believe that if everything changes, then change too must change.

For instance, each generation finds itself further removed from its predecessor. The gap between children and their parents is always a little wider than it had been for parents and their parents. (*Friedman 2009:10*). The same can be said for 'church'.

During this time of continuing change, what will guide us in our understanding of 'church'? How will our ecclesiology mirror our theology and how will our theology reflect the alternative we seek and how will our theology reflect that which we now know?

It is always tempting to look back. And it is important to reflect on how the past has influenced our present, but as historical beings we are not just nourished by

our past. We actually live in the present, and it is a new present, “qualitatively different from any of our human pasts” (*Kaufman 2006:106*). This is the nature of the realm that we seek, it is always the alternative, it is always that which is yet to be but it is also about being alternative and thus we are required to be attentive to alternative, always ready to engage imagination.

It will of course also be tempting to do nothing, lest we upset someone or their pet likes or dislikes, or power structures. We will always create resistance to change otherwise it would not be new, it would not happen without the other, the other person, the other point of view. Without challenge it would become useless fundamentalism. It is always more than its label, more than extremes.

Maybe the question we face is where are our discussion about alternatives? Where are our guides amid these calls for change or redefinition? What will shape our new present which is qualitatively different from our past? If we have any so-called hope as followers of Jesus what might it look like? Maybe we could start with our stories? Perhaps today’s stories, which hint at common everyday life in first century Palestine, and as told by the storyteller we call Matthew, can be a guide, or at least offer a couple of suggestions or signposts.

The images of the ‘church’ as light or salt, as eagerly grabbed hold of by many church leaders, as catalysts for illumination or flavour seem to be in sharp contrast to much of our modern mega-church or mission thinking. These sayings might appear to uncover something of the indirect and hidden nature of the church. That is, they might as stories from the past reveal a way in which the life of a faith community could seek to express itself. Rather than calling attention to itself, to claim some sort of singular truth possessed as a group of people who know it all, who have got it all sorted as if there is only one way of being? Maybe the question we face in our time is what is a church or congregation or a ‘follower of Jesus’, that is most effective when it/they are not noticed. I am not suggesting that church can exist outside of, nor instead of or in separation from, the community that surrounds and feeds us as human beings.

Some years ago, retired Melbourne theologian and educationalist, Denham Grierson, published an important book called, “A People on The Way”. It was a study of

'congregation, mission and Australian culture' where he picked up the three biblical images of light, salt and yeast and said they provide "a theological foundation for a local congregation as it seeks to define its mission".

He then went on: "That mission is best understood as a continuing persisting presence... Much of the witness of the local congregation (will be) of the kind that is hidden within the fabric of community". A continuing persisting presence... Hidden, we might say, like salt? Just enough salt and we say 'this steak is juicy and tender'. Too much salt and we spit it out and complain. The salt is not detectable if it is doing its job. Its effects are.

Grierson, also being a storyteller, digs into his local history and tells a 'salt' story... His story was that during the post war years in the 1940s in Australia a small but determined Catholic woman heard of the sickness of aged neighbours in small houses in her street.

South Melbourne, the suburb where she lived, was hard hit by strikes and unemployment. Many people were sick because of poor nutrition, and unable to act because of advanced age. So Mary Kehoe mobilised some of her friends and they cooked meals for those who were ill.

A problem arose as to how to carry the meals to those in need? And a solution was found in the use of an old pram. The meals were loaded into the pram, and pushed up the street to the houses of the unwell and needy, and to a canteen two houses from Mary Kehoe's place. Her efforts to involve the local council had resulted in the provision of two huts to act as a relief centre. Meals cooked at her house were wheeled to the canteen where many gathered for emergency help. Thus began 'Meals on Wheels', which today it is so much a part of many of our social service provisions where its beginnings are lost and forgotten. What this does is give hope and support to hundreds of people, who without it, would not survive.

The manifestation of imagination, human effort and a continuing persisting presence, hidden, like salt changes things.

Biblical scholar Barbara Reid puts Matthew's 'salt' story in some sort of context: "...the uses of salt in the ancient world included: seasoning, preservation, purification, and judgment..." She goes on: "In saying to his disciples, 'You are the salt of the earth' Jesus could have meant that they perform any and all of these functions: that they draw out the liveliness and flavour of God's love in the world; they are a sign of God's eternal fidelity; they bring to judgment all that is opposed to God's *basiliea*". (Reid 2001:48). Like the symbolic Hebrew Passover meal the reality of collaboration, shared celebration, shared resources the church is seen in its becoming.

Then She makes this important comment: She says: "The task of Christians in every age is to discern what it means in a new context to be faithful to the words and deeds of Jesus. Just as Christians of the last century determined that abolition of slavery was being most faithful to the gospel, even though Jesus' teachings presumed the institution of slavery, so today we face the challenge of eliminating sexism, inculturation, extremisms and systems of domination, though even though these are woven into the fabric of the Gospels". Makes some significant challenges for reliance of restructuring I suggest. If everything changes, then change must change too.

What do we mean when we suggest our new way of being will be characterised or shaped by:

- (a) listening to the community first rather than talk;
- (b) letting what we hear and feel and sense genuinely shape our gospel response;
- (c) letting our response be original and creative.

I want to suggest that St Andrews has been innovative, attentive to others and resourceful in its support and initiatives. It's model has been to speak inclusive language, to be inclusive in its actions and its evangelism tries to be a continuing receptive persisting presence, and hidden if you like, like salt. And amid change that too is changing. Where is the alternative that identifies the Way of Jesus?

If we are to face a 'church' which is discussing change and restructuring because of dwindling resources and interest in faith communities that come with an identity assumed or not... And if we are to face this changing situation with integrity and purpose, then how we become 'church' in the community, will be

more important than how we are structured within any set of set of Regulations or guidelines or Constitution. Note I haven't given you any solution because I am not sure we have understood the question yet. What does it mean to be light and salt to those who don't understand or want to be like us? How do we be a continuing persisting presence... This is the question that is being asked.

**Bibliography:**

Friedman, E. H. **What are You Going to Do with Your Life? Unpublished Writing and Diaries.** New York. Seabury Books, 2009.

Grierson, D. **A People on The Way. Congregation, Mission and Australian Culture.** Melbourne. JBCE, 1991.

Kaufman, G. D. **Jesus and Creativity.** Minneapolis. Fortress Press, 2006.

Reid, B. E. **Parables for Preachers. Year A.** Collegeville. The Liturgical Press, 2001.