

“And I came to you in weakness and fear and in much trembling. My speech and my words were not with plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” A very wise old minister once said to me if you don’t approach the pulpit in weakness and fear you are not relying on God. Some Sundays it is easy to feel confident about what we preach and sometimes I wonder if I am merely spouting plausible words of wisdom. Other times I know I have much less confidence, but it is then I allow the Spirit to take over and I rely on the power of God. One of the girls asked me this week, “When you pray at GB or in Assembly how do you know what to say?” This is an eminently intelligent question and one that can only be answered as Paul does in this passage when he says, “We speak God’s wisdom secret and hidden.” Paul tells his hearers that when he came to them, he didn’t come proclaiming the mystery of God with lofty words or wisdom but purely and simply with the knowledge of Jesus Christ and him crucified. If we are to share our faith with others we can only do by knowing Jesus and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to allow us to share our real and lived experience so that others don’t just take our word for it or rely on human wisdom but on the power of God. As John the Baptist was not the Messiah but he came to point others to the Messiah we too are salt and light in the sense that we point others to the true salt and light.

After the release of Space Odyssey 2001, filmmaker Stanley Kubrick said: “The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent...” He went on: “... but if we can come to terms with this indifference, then our existence as a species can have genuine meaning. However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.”

The universe is indifferent to us and the universe is constantly evolving. God did not set us down in the middle of a universe that is just indifferent to us. He set us down in and made us part of a universe that is also evolving and growing, moving, unescapably toward something which will be determined, largely, by us.

That creative force which Christians know as God is not just creative. God is also loving and benevolent and has, in other words, invited us to participate in our own evolution. We get to decide, to a very large degree, in which direction we will grow. Will we grow toward the light, or will we grow toward the darkness? It’s up to us. In Jesus, God has shown us the direction God wants us to evolve. God has shown us how to live if we want to orient the universe toward light and love, toward compassion and generosity and hope. God has shown us, in other words, the path to God’s kingdom, to authentic human living.

In fact, Jesus tells us, in today’s gospel that his way is God’s chosen way for us to live and evolve. It is the way of being that makes us authentically human and gives us our reason for living.

He used the metaphor of salt because it was a precious commodity in those days. Mined from the earth like precious stones and in some places, it was used as currency. Used not just to flavour but to preserve food as well, nearly two thousand years before refrigeration. Salt was a thing that had purpose and its purpose was to be salty. But if salt loses its saltiness... My chemistry teacher, who was also a fine Christian, told us that salt can’t lose its saltiness. If it does, it’s not salt. A salt molecule is made up of a sodium atom bonded to a chlorine atom. For that bonded sodium chloride (salt) molecule to lose its saltiness would mean that the atoms would have to un-bond and return to their original form which is sodium and chlorine. In other words, salt that isn’t salty isn’t salt; it’s sodium and chlorine. Likewise, Christians who don’t exhibit the characteristics of Christianity, love, kindness, generosity, caring, acceptance, etc. are not Christians. They are people who call themselves Christians, but they aren’t really Christians.

We have many situations which over the years have given Christians a bad name from the crusades to personal abuse, from those who have sat in judgement over other human beings to those who have robbed innocent people searching for healing or prophecy, from our own wrongdoings which have hurt and upset others.

When Stanley Kubrick suggested that it is up to us to “supply our own light” in a vast, dark universe, he came surprisingly close to what Matthew suggests when Jesus tells his followers, “You are the light of the world.”

Jesus brings in another metaphor. Like salt, a lamp has a function and a purpose. It is meant to illuminate. No one buys a lamp, fills it with oil, lights it, and then places it under a bushel basket. No, a lamp is meant to illuminate. So not only do we not put it under a bushel basket, we put it high up on a lampstand so the whole room can benefit from the light it sheds. An oil lamp that cannot be lit, that cannot shed light, is simply a bottle of oil.

Like the salt and the lamp, we human beings were created for a specific purpose and that purpose is to spread and reflect the light of love, kindness, generosity, faith, and hope. Christian human beings know that when we are uncertain about what that light, that love, that kindness looks like, we need look no further than Jesus Christ, his life, his love, and his grace.

When we do that, when we shine that light, when we are that light, we shift the direction of the universe. Slightly, to be sure, ever so slightly. But by our love and our devotion to Jesus and his way we participate in and influence the evolution of the universe out of darkness and into light. Last week the Sunday School made 3 huge posters with hand painting on the letters KND. Going into the Sunday School room I have some difficulty in understanding the point of this lesson and had to text Fiona. She kindly sent me a picture with Isabella standing up very straight in the midst of the K and the N. The illustration was that you couldn't have kindness with the I in the middle. I put that out to the pupils and staff at Rowntree this week as a wee challenge. Can you be the I in kind this week? Of course, we are more than capable of bending the universe toward darkness, but we are equally capable of bending it toward light.

I believe that God has given us some very specific rules, but God has also given us huge latitude and freedom regarding those rules. We can live within them in any number of ways, as we choose. And we can even choose to live outside the rules.

No matter how we choose there are consequences, of course. That is what true freedom is all about, isn't it? Getting to make our own decisions and living with the consequences of those decisions.

The path to authentically human life is broad. There are any number of choices we can make and still stay on the path. There are any number of ways to spread light, but the authentic Christian does spread that light. As authentic Christians we take the light that is Jesus Christ, we own that light and then we spread it into the dark and indifferent universe as far as it can shine.

Not just because it's a good idea. Not just because we have nothing better to do but because it is our very reason for being as Christian disciples.