

Leith 12/2/17 Salt & light; Justice, Mercy & Faith.

Kia Ora Katou, good morning, welcome.

I want to start off this morning by posing a question: how does God speak to us & guide us as a church, as a community of people?

I've been involved in a lot of different churches in my life, & seen lots of different approaches to leadership & discerning what God is saying. In some of them, the expectation was that God would speak to the leadership or the Pastor or Pastors, & they then get up & deliver the message & the vision from the front. Usually without too much room for discussion or questions. And of course God can do it that way. But I have also seen the limitations of that approach. For one it's very top down, & it can have the effect of creating a kind of spiritual underclass, or create an enforced immaturity, where the rest of the congregation or community is kept very passive, & even dependent. It's that classic clergy-laity division that I don't think is very like the New Testament picture at all.

But there are other ways of understanding how God speaks & guides a community, & the role that leadership & visionary leadership plays in that. And that is the model of the community listening together, praying together, discerning & visioning together - & in this model the leadership listens together with the people they are leading - so that they are listening both to God & to each other.

One of the best examples from history I can think that exemplifies this is Dr MLK & his team's leadership of the black civil rights movement in the US through the 60's. Hero of mine. We all know how incredibly powerful & moving his sermons & speeches were. We all know his ability in those speeches to cast a vision so compelling & so beautiful & so powerful that it moved multitudes to action & to stand up, & to march, & to push back against the powers of darkness & oppression that had poisoned American society & the American legal system up until that time. The people rose up & they punched a hole in a system that had been built on slavery, on racism, on injustice - & in a dramatic move of God the people broke free from the yoke of tyranny. But here's the thing with MLK's leadership: for one he was part of a team, with many people playing vital roles; The other is, as a prophetic type, it's easy to think he must have had this really unusual gift for being able to hear what God was saying to God's people at that particular time in history in history - & he did - but he also had the ability to hear what God was saying in & through the people he led. Like Moses before him, MLK had heard the cries & the pain & saw the oppression of his people. And he was able to envision their dreams & their hopes. But his particular gift was his ability to articulate back to the people the dream that they all held in their hearts &

longed for, for themselves & their children, & his gift was that he could announce that dream back to them more clearly than they could announce it, & paint it more vividly than they could describe it.

So when MLK said stood up & cried out "*I have a dream!*" he wasn't just talking about his own dream, he was describing to them their dream, the dream buried in their hearts. And the Biblical prophets do the same when they cry out that "*the nations will one day beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks*"

So the role of a vision caster isn't to pluck out of thin air & cast it to the people. Their role is to listen to the vision that God is putting in the hearts of the people & then to announce it so clearly that it becomes a call that people are inspired by & rise up & follow & enact.

Because we have such a powerful image of MLK as a "leader" & as a preacher, we often forget the lengths he went to be among & to listen to the people he served. In the last few years of his life, for example, he actually moved into a slum in Chicago in an effort to get closer to the poor black folk of that city, & to better understand what their life & their struggles were like.

Now I realise I've probably made a mistake here by talking about MLK's leadership, because he sets the bar so high, how can any of us here even hope to come close. But for me, this is model is aspirational, something I want to aim for. I want our leadership team here - Nancy, Waldir, myself, our elders - to be leaders who listen, & help you discern your dream for your life, for this church, for this world. My dream is that everyone here be released & mobilised to become all they can be in there area of gifting & calling, & into their dream. I look around & see that this is such a gifted community that we have here - we have so much to offer each other & our city. One of my more concrete dreams is that we can raise up a team of pastors & pray-ers to work alongside Nancy & Waldir & myself. Its also just necessary, because it would be impossible for Nancy, Waldir & myself to provide pastoral care for say 200 people. Particularly with me on 20 hrs per week, Nancy & Waldir on 10.

So we want to hear your dreams. Please don't hesitate to make a time with me for us to do coffee & just talk about whatever it is that is on your heart.

Having said all of this, I do now want to tell you about a couple of significant conversations I have had this week, that gave rise to light bulb moments. The first happened on Tuesday, when I was chatting with someone about the messages we have had at Leith the last few weeks. And they said, one of the things they were struggling with, is this pattern we have here in church (all churches) where very week we bring a whole, brand new big message, a whole new block of thinking from the Scriptures - when - this person said - I

don't even feel like I've really processed or had time to enact the last message, or the one before that.

As soon as they said it "I thought, wow, you're right". And its actually a thought I have had often while sitting out there listening to messages. But now that I'm up here...well the pressure to perform kicks in.... the sense that I need to provide you with something fresh & new. Good side to that - responsibility to bring the word of God to the best of my ability; the down side - it becomes more about performing than really trying to hear what God is saying for us, right now, at this time & place in our journey.

And so, this week, I though we should press the pause button - & reflect on what we feel God has been saying to us these past few weeks through the Scriptures. Instead of running on to a whole new message, lets reflect a little deeper on some of the really important stuff we've been hearing recently.

Two weeks ago, our reading was from Micah 6:8, that famous verse where God asks us to act with justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. We talked about the 'prophetic tradition' that Micah - like Isaiah & the other prophets - were walking in, the ability to step to the side of their own culture & religion & critique it, & call it out whenever it rebelled against God's dream. We saw that in the prophetic tradition, justice & mercy count for far more than religious activity (for example, Isaiah in the 1st chapter of that book tells us *"I'm sick of your burnt offerings; I'm sick of your religious festivals - seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the fatherless and plead the case of the widow"*). and we saw that Jesus also walked in this 'prophetic tradition', which is why he so often clashed with the religious leaders of his day whenever he perceived they were acting without justice, without mercy, or without humility.

The following week, Nancy built further on this theme when she bought us the word from Matthew 5:13-16 - that we, as disciples, are the salt of the earth & the light of the world. We learned that salt was very valuable, and that it disinfects, cleans, heals, gives flavour & stops things going bad. We remembered that to be useful, salt needs to be in close contact or relationship with that it's trying to influence, that it needs to be mixed among the world it is flavouring or savouring. Indeed, if its just gathered into a pile, it tends to be quite useless, even harmful, burning the soil it sits upon.

Light on the other hand, is by definition separate & set apart from the darkness. It pierces darkness; where light is, darkness can't be. Paul elsewhere tells us that light exposes things hidden by darkness, reveals things, & when those things are exposed to light, they can become light (Phil 5:8).

So the word of the Lord to us has been clear. We are called to be the salt *in* our communities, & to be the light *of* our world, perhaps where it's most dark; & to act with justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.

And these are the deep desires of our hearts, I know that. But at the same time it is easy for us to feel overwhelmed & inadequate, & to not know where to start. Well, if we are going to be strength-based, first of all, we should start by acknowledging all the good things that are happening in & through us already - & the many things we can join in with at different levels. As you have seen in the Newsletter & Alan explained to us, you've got a book mark that highlights four of the areas of mission that we are committed to supporting at Leith this year:

The PSO buddy programme, which is about walking alongside & mentoring kids who may be living in difficult circumstances; this is a wonderful ministry headed up by our friend Marco, who'll be talking to us more about the Buddy programme on the 12th of March. And there's great opportunity for more of us to get involved there.

Another ministry we support is that of Orphans Aid Int, which is headed up here in Dn by our own Hilary Campbell, & there are plenty of opportunities to help to at the OA shop in Sth Dn, to help with their collection, & to raise money for orphan care, which is fantastic. And if you would like to help Hilary with any of these areas - Hilary is over here, & she'd love to talk with you.

We also support the work of Rock Solid, which runs youth development programmes, in some way similar to the Buddy programme, with clubs & camps & mentoring, & we work with around 150 kids & teens a week in Sth Dn; and like the buddy programme we are also looking for mentors & volunteers to work alongside our youth workers. And you can come & talk to me about this one, as that's the other hat that I wear when I'm not working here - I work 10 hrs a week for RS.

Our 4th area of mission focus is the nation of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), where in prayer we support our friends Anna Sui & Henry Van Thio, who up until last year were part of our congregation here, & then through a stunning series of events, Henry ended up becoming the no. 2 Vice President of Myanmar, 3rd in line after Aung Sung Suu Kyii; while Anna is a gifted & dynamic pastor & teacher. And Helen & Wayne - who have been integral to our life at Leith for so long, are off back to Myanmar next month for their 2nd exploratory visit there to see if this is the place they are to be ministering for the next chapter of their lives.

And there are other people who have gone out from us, like Yolanda Ray who is in the Philippines working among women in the sex industry there.

And here in this city, many of you, I know, are involved in good & beautiful things that reflect Jesus' call to justice, mercy & faithfulness. Every Wednesday morning Bronwyn Daly, Renee, & Nicky gather food from food share, box it up & either take it out to people who are struggling, or sit in our lounge up in Malvern St & have a cup of coffee with those who come into collect theirs. Its a neat ministry, & they'd love more people to be involved.

As many of you also know, Colin is very involved in ministry down at the prison in Milton, helping to run programme called 'seasons of growth' , & being a listening ear & a loving heart in that place. If you talk to Colin, he'll give you many moving a powerful stories of the things he's experienced in that work, & I know the are looking for more people who could help run that 'seasons of growth' course.

Now I've picked out some different things that different folk among us are involved in & we are supporting, & that exemplify the line in the song we often song here *"I'll follow you into the homes of the broken"* - but actually, I know there are many more stories yet to be heard, because so many people here are being *salt & light in your workplaces, in schools, in colleges, in halls, in hospitals, in all kinds of places all over the city.*

And yet at the same time, I know how easily overwhelmed we can feel by just who great the needs are: there is so much pain, & violence & fear out there. It's so easy for us to get paralysed by that. But here's a little saying that I've found very helpful, & which no doubt you've heard too: *"it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness"*. Its better to do one small act of kindness & generosity that to be overwhelmed & paralysed with despair at how bad things are.

I'm sure you also know that wonderful quote from Mother Theresa, where she says *"We cant all do great things, but we can all do small things with great love"*; that for me has been such an important voice to hear, because one of things that can paralyse me, is that I tend to have this desire to want to do something really big & heroic & high impact for God, & then when I cant figure out what that really big or high impact thing is, I get stuck & frustrated, & I end up doing nothing, or cursing the darkness, or beating myself up. But we really are called to just start, where we are with what we've got, by doing that one small thing, talking to that one person, reaching out to that one neighbour. D night.

And maybe this is where we should pause again, & ask God - who is that one person you want me to reach out to this week; or that one work mate you want me to get alongside? What's my one candle? What's my one small act of love?

Ok, now I want to finish up, to wind up, by going back to something else Nancy said last week. That *in order for us to shine the light of Jesus, we have to have opened up our lives and allowed the light of Jesus to shine in here, in us*. There's a process of us constantly renewing of our relationship with Jesus, of constantly opening up ourselves - because you know - we get jaded, we get disappointed, we get let down, we get overwhelmed, & that light that once burned so bright can start to grow dim.

That's very much where I was at 4 or 5 years ago. As a follower of Jesus, I was really struggling. I was doing most of the right things still, but there was no joy in it, going to church was a chore, worship felt like hard work, prayer felt like a ritual - and to be honest with you, I was disappointed with God, & I was disappointed with life. I was really in the blahs. But then I had this idea that maybe I should try going back to the beginning, & so I turned to that verse in Revelation 3:20 that says

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me", & began to meditate on that verse every day for several weeks. Not just reading it or praying it, but really sitting with it & letting it sink down into me. And as I did that, I came to understand that I couldn't just ask Jesus into the front room, the surface part of my life, that part that everyone can see & that look's pretty respectable & pretty together, but I needed to keep inviting the Spirit of Jesus to come deeper, into rooms I had sealed off & was perhaps trying to ignore. For example, I realised that I had a room called 'disappointment' that contained a lot of the bottled up things that had gone wrong in the years around that period.

This process what on for weeks, where I'd come to realise that there were other rooms inside me that I need to invite Jesus into, to come & sit & sup with me in. And in prayer, & in my imagination (Helen) I would ask Jesus into those rooms, & I'd open the door for him, & he'd throw a light on, & there'd usually be a scurrying of cockroaches & such to get away from the light, & then I'd ask Jesus to name some of the things in the room, or on the table that needed to be cleaned up, & then I'd ask Jesus to deal with them, & I'd hand those things over to him. It was a process that was both painful, & liberating. But after several weeks of this, I did feel like I was back in an actual relationship with Jesus, & not just going through the motions. I could say a lot more about this process & this experience, & if you are feeling stuck, spiritually, & you think this could help, I'm happy to chat with you about it.

So as we finish this service, & as we wind up, I want to offer the opportunity for prayer. Maybe God is calling you to open up some rooms that are a bit dark, & that have been sealed off, & that need to have the light & love of Jesus enter them. Maybe like I described, you've been at a low ebb, even

feeling disappointed with life & with God or even with yourself. Nancy &BI will be up the front here & very happy to pray with you.

Or maybe God has been speaking to you about getting involved with one of the ministries we've talked about this morning, & we could pray about that too, or you could simply go & approach one of the people already involved & ask them how you can join in.