

**Sermon: Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Theme: Minutes to Midnight, or Countdown to the New Day?**  
**Text: Matthew 5:13-20**

**<sup>13</sup> ‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.**

**<sup>14</sup> ‘You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**

**<sup>17</sup> ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

What’s the time? That’s an easy question. Just look at your watch or your phone. But what time is it globally? According to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist, it’s 90 seconds to midnight. And we are closer to midnight, and the end of all things, than we’ve ever before. Why?

Well, we’ve seen war break out in Ukraine, and Russia’s threat to use nuclear weapons, together with fighting that has impacted key nuclear power plants in Ukraine. There have also been climate effects. Oil and gas use has increased, and so have emissions have increased. COVID-19 points to the increased risk of diseases that are transmitted from humans to animals or designed in a laboratory. Then there’s AI and cyberwarfare. It’s hard to know what is real, and true, and what is not.



It’s 90 seconds to midnight. Darkness has well and truly set in. Even worse is the fact that midnight marks the end, and not the beginning of a new day. Last week I shared with you some sections from a recent article by Greg Sheridan, in the Weekend Australian. It was his contention that Western society is heading into a new era of paganism. This is seen primarily in the loss of a shared story about who human beings are: that all people are created in God’s image, and have supreme value because of this truth. Instead, there are many truths, and the key drivers in this new world are individuality, self-expression, diversity, pleasure and consumption. There’s no creator, and instead of the old pagan gods, who treated people as

their playthings, there's just each one of us, doing what is best for ourselves. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

So what do you think? Is it 90 seconds to midnight? Is the end nigh? Or is this the darkness that comes before the dawn? The only answer that disciples of Jesus can give is a hopeful one-there is a future for the human race through Jesus Christ. As Paul says when he is on trial before King Agrippa in Acts 26: **"I testify to small and great alike...that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."**

Today's gospel reading forms part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount-his kingdom manifesto. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? How does Jesus' teaching and life transform the way we think and act? How do Jesus followers point forward to a better way for the world by pointing back to the world-changing death and resurrection of Jesus, made real in their lives today and in Jesus, the Messiah-King who is alive and ruling in the here and now, and also in the future that will come?

Jesus begins his sermon with words of blessing that turn conventional wisdom upside down: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...the merciful...the pure in heart...the peacemakers..."** and most shockingly, those who are persecuted and insulted because of their faith and trust in Jesus. These are the blessings that come from the blessing of having been made right with God through Jesus' righteousness-that is, his death on the cross and his resurrection on the third day. When Jesus died, even creation was shrouded in darkness, and the cosmos held its breath. Was this the end? No! Sunday morning dawned bright and fresh, and the empty tomb made clear that this was only the beginning. It's not minutes to midnight, but a new day, a new hope, a new world is dawning through Jesus. This is the good news that the church has to share with the world, through Jesus Christ.

Jesus uses two strong images today to let his disciples know what it means to follow him and proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. **"You are the salt of the earth."** Not "You can be" or "you should be." You are because you are in me and I am in you. As a living cell needs salt in order to function, as food is preserved by being salted, as salt provides flavour, you are all those things. Your presence in the world is for the good of others, to preserve, protect, cleanse. Your job is not to hide away, but to humbly, sacrificially go about the task of following me into challenging, difficult and painful places. Being merciful, humble, pure in heart and motive, healing conflict, and being prepared to suffer for doing so.



Jesus goes on, **“But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”** Luke connects these words with Jesus’ call to **“carry our cross and follow him.”** Insignificant salt doesn’t do anything. A church that doesn’t preserve, protect and cleanse the culture has abandoned its calling.

Jesus introduces a second image. **“You are the light of the world.”** As I hear those words, two things immediately come to mind. One is Jesus’ own self-identification. **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”** The second is that our calling is contingent on the light of life that Jesus shines in us. That’s why we speak Jesus’ words today over a person when they are baptised: **“You are the light of the world. Let your light shine to the glory of God the Father.”**



Jesus goes on to say, **“A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”** The city of Jerusalem was situated high on a hill, and its light could be seen for miles and miles around. In the same way, God’s covenant people were called to be his light, but they refused to reflect the light he shone on them through his holy covenant and his law. They lit a lamp **“and put it under a bowl.”**

We can so easily do the same thing. We can become so preoccupied with what is going on within our church that we forget the purpose for which God has gathered us together—that **“people may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”** The beatitudes, and what follows in the Sermon on the Mount, give shape to what these good words are—acts of love, mercy and servanthood that flow out of the light of Christ in us.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians: **“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.’** That’s the light we shine; his light in us. Shining this light in a world of increasing darkness is not easy. We may feel that our lamp is on the verge of being snuffed out. It is so easy to be weighed down by the gloomy prognosis I shared earlier, 90 seconds to midnight, or, on the other hand, bury our head in the sand and pretend that nothing is wrong, or if it is, it’s nothing to do with us. How critical it is for us to gather together as we are doing again today, being encouraged and enlightened by God’s word and the nourishment of Jesus’ holy meal, and supporting one another.

Paul gives the church in Philippi this great word of encouragement. **“Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.”**



My favourite time of the day is dusk, and the golden hour around sunset. The light is made more vivid by the encroaching darkness, and the colour is beautiful beyond description. The day is coming to an end, but the light is a foretaste of the dawn. And of course dawn is also a remarkable time. The darkness drains away and the light creeps over the horizon, then bursts into full bloom.

It was once said that the sun never sets on the British Empire. That's not the case anymore, of course. Nor is it the case for the age of Christendom. The sun has certainly set, and no longer does the church have a position of privilege and power. But as the darkness of paganism, comes, the golden light of the good news shines even more brightly and distinctly. Even though the night may be getting darker, the darkness cannot overcome it, and the light itself is more powerful and captivating than before. When midnight comes, so will the brand-new day, with all those who trust in Jesus living in the city of God, where there is no need for **“the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”** We are the people of the light. This is our hope. This is the that vanquishes the darkness. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook