

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”

It was in 1630
that the future governor of the colony of Massachusetts
the puritan John Winthrop
preached a sermon while he was still on a ship
heading towards the shores of this country.
He called his sermon,
“A Model of Christian Charity”
and in it
he drew on Jesus’ image
in our gospel today
by arguing that this new colony
should be a city on a hill,
a phrase
that has become part of the American lexicon.

But I suspect our familiarity with the phrase
“city on a hill”
used in a political context,
may mean that we have forgotten
where it came from,
from Jesus’ and his sermon on the Mount.
You remember from last week how it began,
Jesus,
a little overwhelmed by the crowds who had been following him night and day,
had gone up a mountain
trailed by his disciples.
And there he sat down,
gather them around,
and began to speak.
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
And on he went with what we know as the Beatitudes,
and after the final one, the kicker,

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account..."

after that

Jesus went on

with the words we read in our gospel today.

““You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

I suspect its hard for us to imagine what Jesus was talking about.

When we hear the words,

city on a hill,

our minds go back

to that sermon by John Winthrop,

and the many times

that those words have been used since then.

But the image that Jesus was using was very different.

He was talking

to a group of men

who'd grown up in the land around the edge of the sea of Galilee.

The nearest city

would have been Tiberias,

a Roman settlement

where Jews were not particularly welcome.

And one that was down by the lakeside,

not high on a hill.

If they were lucky, they might, like Jesus when he was a child,

have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem,

or at least heard the stories

that other pilgrims told.

That was the original

city on the hill.

Jerusalem, built on Mount Zion.

You would travel up from Jericho,

far below sea level, up eighteen miles of winding dusty road,

and thirty three hundred feet of elevation until finally,
exhausted,
you would come round the Mount of Olives
and see the city, Jerusalem,
flickering lamps in the windows
to welcome you.

It's hard for us to imagine the impact of that.
We live in a time and place
where it is never
dark.
Not only do we have our lights on in our houses
till well into the night,
but our streets are well lit,
and the residual glow from New York
keeps us in a kind of semi-darkness, semi light
even in the darkest of nights.

But if you've ever been driving out in the midwest late at night
preferably when there's no full moon,
the darkness is almost palpable.
It's almost as if
you've got a sack over your head.
And when you finally come upon a town
those first little pinpricks of light
are so welcome.

Or perhaps you've taken a flight that arrives at Kennedy airport at night,
having swung out over the sea,
and everything is dark
until you see that line of lights
along the shore.
Welcome to
Long island.

In a world that is full of darkness
we are called to be like those little clusters of light
that shine so welcomingly
in the darkness.

“You are the light of the world.”

But the city on the hill
is not the only way
that Jesus talks about being
us being
the light of the world.

“No one after lighting a lamp,” he says, “puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”

Jesus is not talking about this,
with a nice reliable lightbulb.
He’s talking about this.
Can you see it?
This is a lamp
from the time of Jesus.
Yes, it’s two thousand years old.
The base would be filled with oil
and a wick passed out the spout,
and that wick would be lit.
Essentially the same principle
as our acolyte torches.
And the light it gave
was good by the standards of its time:
It was steady and reliable
and relatively bright,
at least compared with a fire.
But still just a tiny light,
a pinprick -
but enough
to push back the darkness.

And of course,
with light so precious,
and oil costly,
you'd be hardly likely to light your lamp,
then pick up the basket
you carried vegetables home from the market in
and put it over the lamp.

You are the light of the world,
Jesus says.
You are one of those pinpricks of light
that welcomes people.

Sometimes
we read the bible, and particularly the Sermon on the Mount
as a whole list of things
that we have to do.
But here, Jesus is
If, as John says at the beginning of his gospel,
Christ the Word of God
is the light of all people.
that shines in the darkness,
and the darkness does not overcome it,
we, as his followers,
we reflect
that light.

One of my earliest memories of church is crouching in a church hall at the age of four,
singing,
“Jesus bids us shine with a pure, clear light,
Like a little candle burning in the night
In this world of darkness, so let us shine...”
and as we began the final line, we would turn around, stand, and hold our index fingers in
the air,
“You in your small corner, and I in mine.”

Sometimes, I suspect
we overstate
Christ’s call to us.
We try to be
the whole city on the hill,
and then abandon it
as impossible.
But we’re actually just supposed to be lamps.
Little lights,
each shining in our own small corner.
But together,

together
just like those lamps
in the homes of the city of Jerusalem,
together
we can be
the city on the hill
which welcomes pilgrims
to God.

Or in other words, as we heard from the Prophet Micah last week, and which,
incidentally,
John Winthrop also quoted in his sermon,
Do justice.
Love mercy.
Walk humbly
with your God.
And let people see it.
Let people see you, and as they do,
give glory
to God.

“You are the light of the world.”