

SALT AND LIGHT

1 Kings 18v1-16.

Have you ever finished reading the biography of some great Christian and been left with mixed feelings? On the one hand the story has been inspiring; on the other hand it has made you feel like a spiritual pygmy. While this person has blazed great trails of faith *you* are stuck with the more mundane things of life.

This may have contributed to the idea that to be a first class specimen of godliness you have to become a missionary or evangelist or Christian minister. In our kind of church this sometimes shows itself in young people saying they feel called to “full time Christian work”, *whatever that is!*

Again, this is not helped by some of the great biographies. One of my heroes, C.T. Studd, left his cricket career for missionary work even though many voices urged that he could use his fame for Christ. In his case, pioneering in China, India and Africa proved to be an undoubted call of God. But you can see how easy it is to conclude that this is what *we* should do too! We should leave our “secular” world for more “spiritual” pursuits.

Back in the 60’s Cliff Richard declared himself a Christian and decided to abandon pop music to become an R.E. teacher. But then he concluded that the world of popular music needed Christians and he was more likely to have an influence for good there; and that is where he has stayed and been a consistent witness to Jesus Christ. In the 70’s the actor James Fox came to know Christ and was so repulsed by what he had seen and experienced as a “film star” that he left it all and became a missionary with the Navigator movement. Some years later he returned to acting. Many Christians muttered: *“Has he backslidden?”*

I think this issue is addressed in **Matthew 5v13-16** where Jesus describes believers in terms of salt and light. These are *not* two ways of saying the same thing. Salt and light function very differently. One is hidden and invisible while the other is public and meant to be seen. They describe two *contrasting* ways of being a righteous presence in society, and both are needed. In our text this morning we have an example of each. Obadiah is salt and Elijah is light. Obadiah is what I will call “a believing presence” living out his faith in a corrupt, worldly environment, while Elijah is “a prophetic presence” declaring war on that world and standing out like a lighthouse.

1. OBADIAH: A BELIEVING PRESENCE.

Obadiah is in charge of Ahab & Jezebel’s palace during a time of unprecedented evil in Israel; yet the indicators point to him being a faithful believer. Obadiah is present in the court seeking to be a righteous presence in the heart of darkness.

But is this possible? Is Obadiah not compromised by working for the King? Is he not guilty by association? This is the conclusion some have come to about Obadiah. But there are plenty of reasons to believe that Obadiah's presence in the King's court was a righteous presence.

- It is the verdict of the writer of the book of Kings. (v3). "Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord". On other occasions this same editor is not slow to say when someone was not!
- His name marked him out as a visible believer. There was nothing secret about his faith in Yahweh. The name Obadiah means "Worshipper of Yahweh". Imagine how that stuck in Jezebel's throat.
- He claims to be devoted to the Lord. (v12) "I have worshipped the Lord since my youth." Here he uses a word play on his own name; he says "I have "Obadiah'd" since my youth" (I have lived up to my name!)
- He could be a restraining influence on the King. Ahab would be surrounded by plenty of "yes" men giving bad counsel. So Obadiah's access to Ahab gave him the opportunity to bring more of a godly influence to bear.
- His privileged position gave him access to vital information. For instance it was almost certainly "inside" information that made it possible for him to save 100 prophets from Jezebel's plot to murder them. And Obadiah's expertise meant he could handle the logistics of hiding and feeding one hundred men.

Obadiah represents an extreme example of a believing presence. It is full of risks. It would be easy to end up lowering his standards or trying to serve two masters or leading a double life. His reputation would be tainted in the eyes of some. There is evidence from the text that he had become fearful of Ahab; and he is aware of how he must appear to others and so he becomes eager to justify himself to Elijah.

When Jesus talked about "**the salt of the earth**" (Matthew 5v13) he described people like Obadiah. Salt functions in several ways; as disinfectant: purifying and cleansing; as a preservative: stopping food going rotten; as a condiment: enhancing flavour. This is a good summary of what it means to be a believing presence in society. We act like salt, cleansing what is impure, preventing rottenness spreading, & improving what we come into contact with. And like salt, the believing presence is only noticed and its value appreciated when it is missing.

In the workplace you can be a believing presence by being honest, punctual, giving your best, and relating well to those around you; by the way you speak about your boss and the way you treat those under you; by the way you handle ambition, and money, and being overlooked for promotion; your speech, your attitudes, your reactions, your support for fellow workers who

are struggling; and of course by praying for those who you work among and your readiness to acknowledge Christ among your work colleagues.

But Jesus also warns us about salt losing its effectiveness. He recognises the precarious nature of being, like Obadiah, a believing presence. Salt mixed with other substances becomes virtually useless. You are to be a believing presence, like salt, but watch out that you are not infected by the bad stuff around you. You can make a difference where God has placed you, but it also requires constant vigilance.

In some jobs there are specific issues which make it extremely difficult at times. e.g. In medicine with some of the ethical issues; in the caring professions - the danger of becoming cynical; in business & commerce & industry - the lust for power & profit and wiping out rivals; in the arts – standards of decency; in the media - privacy & truthful reporting; as a student - your own standards of morality, the drink issue, debt.

You can make a difference. Face the risks. Keep close to Christ. Go on being filled with the Spirit. Be a believing presence.

2. ELIJAH: A PROPHETIC PRESENCE.

If Obadiah is an example of “salt” Elijah is an example of being “**the light of the world**”. (Matthew 5v14-16) He is like a city set on a hill with its lights visible for many miles. He is like a lamp on a stand illuminating everything around him. He is not an invisible believing presence, but a highly visible prophetic presence.

Elijah is at the other end of the scale from Obadiah. He only visits Ahab in combat gear. Not for him the day by day living as a believing presence. He bursts on the scene with all guns blazing. He is a provocative and uncomfortable man to be around. He is utterly different; his life, his manner, his appearance. The man himself is a “sign”. He stands in vivid contrast to all around him. He goes for the root issues. Obadiah helps those who are persecuted, but Elijah is not interested in bandaging up the consequences of evil; he is more concerned to attack the source. Elijah is a prophetic presence.

I think you can see why people like Obadiah and Elijah do not always get on. One writer comments that their meeting was marked by “reserve”. He adds, “*Obadiah is deferential and conciliatory, Elijah cold and distant.*” Obadiah might think that Elijah is a bull in a china shop, someone who undoes in a few minutes what he has patiently worked for over many years. Elijah might think Obadiah is trying to serve two masters.

Elijah certainly reminds us that, there are times when, if we fail to be different and fail to confront and expose evil, we *will* share the guilt. Our silence becomes complicity. This is especially true of the church. “*What many yearn for*” writes David Alton, “*is a prophetic church.*” (‘Faith in Britain’ 1991.) Instead the church has been guilty of watering down the gospel to make it

more appealing. We have allowed secular humanism to dominate the media. We have become frightened by political correctness from proclaiming the gospel uncompromisingly. We have followed cultural trends rather than upheld Biblical values. We have left a spiritual vacuum that has been filled by consumerism, pornography, the cult of celebrity, and sporting fanaticism, to name but a few.

So how can we be a prophetic church?

By being different: for example, over something as basic the institution of marriage. Holy Trinity, Brompton is a local church in central London. Yet they have not only pioneered Alpha, they have also launched the Marriage Course as well as a course for helping those who have been through separation and divorce. This is saying, very clearly, “we believe in marriage; but we also want to extend Christ’s mercy to those who have suffered broken marriages”.

By being pro-active: So often the church is re-active. Are there ways in which we can set the agenda? This will involve us being in tune with the Holy Spirit.

By addressing root issues: highlighting the spiritual issues underlying moral and ethical dilemmas. e.g. Mother Theresa on abortion. *“Only God can decide life and death... that is why abortion is such a terrible sin. You are not only killing life but putting self before God; yet people decide who has to live and who has to die. They want to make themselves Almighty God. They want to take the power of God in their hands. They want to say; “I can do without God. I can decide.” That is the most devilish thing that a human hand can do.”*

By doing good: This is an emphasis of Jesus. *“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5v16) e.g. Christian youth events which blitz a needy area in a city with practical help.

By proclaiming the gospel: The church is at its most powerfully prophetic when it proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. This does not just have to be in gospel rallies or even Alphas. For example, one of the serious issues of our day is debt. Organisations like ‘Christians against Poverty’ not only help people out of debt, they share the gospel and invite people to meet Jesus. This is being prophetic. Having an answer to debt is not going to meet their deepest need. Only Jesus can do that. Some of the churches in our north east region of seen people who began by needing debt advice born again and added to their church

Both a believing presence and a prophetic presence are needed.

As individuals: Without doubt some of us are more like Obadiah than Elijah, and others more like Elijah than Obadiah. Somehow God manages to join us up to work together. We need both and we need each other. We need men and women like Obadiah who work day by day in the front line. We also need men and women with Elijah’s mantle – who charge in where angel’s fear to tread.

As a body: the church is to be both a believing presence and a prophetic presence. Every day the church is scattered like salt into homes, streets, localities, schools, colleges, hospitals, offices & other workplaces, trains, planes. But the church must also be a prophetic presence; and it is at it most prophetic when it proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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