

# **Year A**

## **Matthew 5:13-20**

How do you feel about the Church in Scotland today? Well, I would like to begin by quoting from a right-wing Christian organisation called *Solas* who published the following last year.

“Despite brave words and desperate massaging of figures the mainstream churches in Scotland appear to be in terminal decline. The Church of Scotland is haemorrhaging more than 20,000 people per year and its demographic is largely elderly.

Polish and other immigrants are keeping the Roman Catholic Church from an equivalent collapse. Virtually every town and city in Scotland has boarded up church buildings and others that are only being kept open by legacies from the past. Government pays lip service to the establishment of Christianity, and the churches respond by supporting the Establishment. Politicians seek to keep the churches on board knowing that they provide a great deal of the 'Big Society' which fills in the increasingly large holes caused by austerity, poverty and family breakdown. But the churches continue to shrink and the

number of people professing 'no-religion' will soon be a majority. How can it be otherwise when many of our schools and media are increasingly being used for indoctrinating secular humanist values and philosophies into our children?

And how do the churches respond?

Some are in despair and like the last Mennonite community in Britain, which closed this year, have almost given up. Others are in denial. There was a discussion on BBC Radio Scotland this week in which it was stated that whilst only 10% of the population regularly attend church,

'research' has shown that another 20% maintain an active and living Christian faith. In the words of the prophet Victor Meldrew, "I don't believe it'. Apart from the fact that 10% of the population in most areas do not attend church, it is a myth that there are more than a million plus Christians 'out there' in Scotland who have just disconnected from the church and are just waiting for us to reconnect with them. Desperately clutching at straws we speak of 'the invisible church' and comfort ourselves that there are far more Christians than we suspect. It is a mirage that makes

professional clergy feel better about their jobs. Personally I think those who minister to the invisible church should get invisible salaries! You can state ‘I minister to 10,000 people in my parish’ whilst knowing that barely 100 of them ever bother to cross your door. The fact that you get to bury someone does not mean that they are part of Christ’s flock, or yours. Despair, denial and delusion are in deep.”<sup>1</sup>

Now those are challenging, provocative words from a particular wing of the church in Scotland in a profoundly unsettling time for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.solas-cpc.org/wp/solas-in-the-media/scottish-daily-mail-the-dangerous-betrayal-of-scotlands-christian-heritage/>

the Christian church in our nation. We have been in numerical decline since the 1960s. That's 50 years ago now! And decline affects the way we view ourselves and the task that we have been set. This year's Chalmers Lectures, a series of three lectures, were given by Rev Dr Doug Gay of the University of Glasgow and he spoke on the theme, "Reforming the Kirk - the future of the Church of Scotland". The lectures were given in early February. His first lecture looked at exactly what has happened; the decline and its causes. The last two lectures offered a way forward. If you want to read or

listen to the lectures you can online and I'll arrange with Peter for a link to posted on the church website.

Facing decline and its consequences is not easy but it's nothing new, both for the church in Scotland and for the Jewish-Christian faith. There are in fact surprising similarities between the situation that Jesus was speaking into, and what we face today. Remember that the Jewish people had been defeated by foreign powers; they had been exiled to Babylon and when they were permitted to return to their land it wasn't

long before the Romans arrived and returned them to a kind of slavery. They were a defeated people with a claim to ownership of a land, enshrined in their religious faith, which they were not able to have dominion over. Even though the people were living in their ancestral land, the exile might as well have continued because the land, the city and the temple were trampled on by foreigners. And so there were many anxious questions on the people's lips. How can God's holy land be under foreign rule? What does this say about our relationship with God now? What does God want us to do in



response to this calamity? And of course every religious and political group in Israel had its own answers to these questions. Some opted for the sword. Let's fight our way out of our troubles and there were some notable heroes of the past that they could point the people to, as evidence that this was the best response. Then there were others who believed that the best response was to withdraw; to pull back into the community as a people set apart; ritually pure in a defiled world. The Pharisees, in the main, seemed to prefer this approach. This is the broad context of the Sermon on the Mount,

which our text from Matthew's Gospel today is from. Jesus was a Jew and he lived and died a Jew. His call in the first instance was to the Jewish people to be the real and genuine Israel. This was a challenge to those who believed it was right to pull back and retreat into the ghettos. No, said Jesus, you must be salt and light. You must be out there influencing the culture and doing your bit to bring about change.

Now we hopefully can see the parallel challenge that we face and the same words of encouragement and warning are issued to us. We are under pressure as a diminishing

Christian community in Scotland. Our voice is marginalised. There are competing factions within the Christian church, each with a different take on what is happening around us. So it is very important that we hear the words of Jesus in all of this. Do not withdraw into your community of faith. Do not let fear dominate you.

Philip Island, in Victoria, Australia, plays host to one of the greatest nature experiences possible. On the shores of Philip Island are the burrows of thousands upon thousands of fairy penguins, extraordinarily little birds that stand only 30cm or so tall.

Every morning the adult penguins head out to sea to catch fish. At the end of the day they return to land to bring back food for their chicks. Watching them get from the water to their burrows is both funny and exhilarating. The penguins surf in on the waves, then gather in groups at the water's edge. Their burrows are 100 metres or so away, with the open space of the sandy beach between them. All of a sudden a group of penguins will take off, waddling as fast as their little legs will carry them across the beach. But then, having got 10 or 20 metres they'll suddenly turn around and waddle

back to the water. They wait, then try again. One group makes it, but another performs this strange ritual of turning back. And on it goes, through the dying light of day, until finally the penguins have all crossed the beach and met their chicks in their burrows. What's going on? Why the strange stop-start-return ritual? The answer's quite simple. At sea the birds are fast swimmers, able to dive deep. At sea they're safe from predators such as eagles and hawks and dogs and cats. In their burrows they are safe below ground. But on the open beach they're vulnerable and exposed. On the beach they can only

waddle slowly and are easy pickings for predators. And so, as they cross the beach, the moment they see a shadow or something out of the corner of their eye, they turn back and race for the safety of the water.

We mustn't turn around and run to safety. We have to be out in the dangerous place as salt and light. Jesus clearly had an issue with the Pharisees. He warned his followers that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees they could not be part of his kingdom. What did he mean by that? Well, having retreated to the ghetto, the Pharisees were involved in

policing a strict adherence to the law. They prided themselves on how they were able to tick all the boxes. Jesus responded by endorsing the law but condemning their understanding of it. The law is obeyed as the followers become salt and light in their communities. Righteousness equates to acts of justice and mercy breaking out in our world; not to rule keeping. Whatever we make of the church in our nation today there is no doubt that we are called to get out and be active for God's kingdom. May we all find motivation to respond to the words of Christ today.