

## **SERMON FOR 3 BEFORE LENT | 09.02.2020**

Isaiah 58: 1-12; I Corinthians 2: 1-16; St Matthew 5: 13-20

**Salt of the earth... people who influence the way we think...**

**I was quite amused this week to read that when Boris Johnson was accused of not being really serious about climate change recently, he looked around for a 'safe pair of hands' to help him launch his new campaign. And who did he choose? Sir David Attenborough of course!**

**Which made me do a bit of digging to see who are described as the most influential people in our society today? One article I found (from CQ magazine) had compiled what it considered were the 50 leading 'influential people' in Britain – but I have to admit that I didn't recognize lots of their names. The star billing was, perhaps not surprisingly, given to the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, followed by David Beckham, Greta Thunberg, Stormzy and Ed Sheeran. There were lots of leaders in industry and several responsible for technical developments in artificial intelligence. There was a place for Emily Maitlis the journalist but only Boris Johnson got a mention among the politicians. I was pleased to see a mention for a footballer I had never heard of, Rasheem Sterling of Manchester City, who has spearheaded a campaign against racism in sport and there was a spot too for Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the screen writer of Flea-bag and Killing Eve. Not your list perhaps? Well, it's only one person's opinion I guess.**

**Going back to David Attenborough, I suspect that out of that selection of influential people it is probably the 17 year old Greta Thunberg who has had the most impact for most of us. With short phrases, sharp insights and a withering scowl, she is more effective than almost any politician in highlighting the need to respond to the challenges of global warming in recent years. She really has made it possible for everyone to turn their backs on one-use plastic bags - and at last we are all thinking twice about our carbon footprint when we travel or heat our homes – or indeed our churches.**

**But today we might well ask: who has had the most influence on each of us? Has it been politicians and celebrities – or has it been our family and friends, the people we have met personally - and the books we have read?**

**There is no doubt in my mind that the greatest influence in my life have been the members of my family and close friends – not because they were wildly inspirational - although some of them were - but because I cared about what they thought of me and what I was doing. Over the years those opinions have shaped me hugely.**

**But I have to go back to 1972 and a character who was not a particularly good influence, for the one poem that has so very greatly influenced me. This little books of poems by the Cornish historian A L Rowse was given to me by a former headmaster who should have been put in prison for quite a long time for the things that he did. But this poem endures: It is called In Fine: At the end.**

*Things have been made easy for others,  
But never for me.  
Why should this be?  
That is the question.  
Too uncompromising?  
Too anxious to achieve?  
All my life I have tried too hard,  
And now that at the latter end  
It might be thought  
I had the ball at my feet,  
I refuse to pick it up:  
Instead I take  
A malicious delight  
In denying them,  
And make no further effort.*

**Anyone who knows the chequered events of AL Rowse's academic career will recognise the back story in this poem but for me, over all these last forty-five years, these words have been working in me. Like JK Rowling with her rather difficult background, I didn't have a great deal to work with – single parent family with lots of ill health, not much money etc etc etc. In 1972 my sister, recently engaged, had just died and it was just my mother and I as I tried to complete my schooling – with not much success there either.**

**But this poem given, unwittingly, by this dodgy teacher, taught me to count myself immensely fortunate for all the chances that I was being given when everything seemed hopeless.**

**The ball did fall at my feet. Even I could see that. So was I going, out of pride or idleness to refuse to take those opportunities, fail to pick up the ball when it presented itself to me? Was I going to refuse to make the effort?**

**I genuinely believe that one small poem was the germ, the prod I needed to foster my hope of being able to contribute something useful in my own turn.**

**And I suspect that if we looked back, all of us can find similar instances: something said, something done, something shared – that made all the difference - to us and to others. And it is the reason for Jesus' appeal for us to be 'the salt of the earth'.**

**Never mind the scientific fact that salt can never lose its taste: Jesus is just using an analogy. And what he is trying to remind us is that each of us needs to play a role in making sure that all the decisions and all the activity that is taking place around us is – in our complex and over-busy world (and to stretch the food analogy even further) – actually palatable, is actually what we want.**

**The essence of salt is that it draws out the flavour of the food. Too much salt and the food is bitter; too little and the food is bland and not worth bothering with. The essence of the Christian life, then, is to judge when and how much we can add to make the rest of life both enjoyable and worthwhile.**

**In terms of influence, how can we add to what is on offer in a way that is – as in the story of the Three Bears - not too much or too little, but just right?**

**And for certain, the method and the manner of the way we influence other people has had to change over time. Years ago the Church tried being strict, telling people exactly what to think and how to behave; then it tried the sentimental approach, the nostalgic Sunday evening Songs of Praise, with nothing too challenging and lots of pleasant cosiness. It has also tried the wishy-washy approach, somehow suggesting (especially in our Church schools) that all faiths are equal and we Christians shouldn't stand up for anything distinctive at all.**

**St Paul has it so right when he says at the beginning of our second reading: *When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ. My speech were not full of wisdom but were demonstrations of the power of the Spirit....* But how do we become the salt of the earth in a world which seems so turned off by religion? I don't need to point out the obvious: that there wasn't a single religious leader among that list of top 50 influencers, not our Archbishop, not the Pope, not the Chief Rabbi or the Grand Mufti.**

**Which is where the imagination of people like Phoebe Waller Bridge, the writer of *Fleabag* comes in. She has the extraordinary talent to be in that group of 50 top influential people. And she chose, in *Fleabag*, to put a religious character at the heart of it, the heart-throb Andrew Scott.**

**But you say, he is just another example of the world having a crack at the Church; doesn't he throw up his celibacy and jump into bed at the first opportunity?**

**But hang on a minute: what *Fleabag* doesn't do is patronise us or treat us like children. Instead it forces us to think exactly why the bed scene makes sense. And what we discover is what the priest is trying to understand: can physical sex be anything like as satisfying as the relationship he has with God? And when we see that dramatised on the screen she ends up affirming the priest's faith not knocking it down. And the public has said they want more...**

**Which is why we at St James' are putting so much time and effort into our First Communicant programme right now, why I hope we will find more time to think about these big questions ourselves and why we need to encourage more people to join in that thinking with us. As Tristan Howard has written: *The Sunday night God slots may have gone, but it seems the new spaces religion is finding on TV are proving to be more intelligent and interesting explorations of faith and theology than the late Roy Castle or Sir Harry Secombe singing hymns in cardigans ever achieved.***

**We have to be salt if we want to have an influence.**