

FEBRUARY 8, 2026
(5th SUNDAY after the EPIPHANY)

READINGSⁱ

Isaiah 58:1–12

Matthew 5:13–20

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

Australians know more than most people in the world about light; I'm talking, of course, about sunlight. For us, living in a desert continent like Australia, sunlight is both a blessing and a curse.

Indeed, when we think about the sun, we immediately think about drought, sunburn, skin cancer, and, of course, bushfire. I was riding my bike along Safety Bay Road one Sunday, some years ago, when I saw a thick smoke billowing on the horizon. There was, back then, a major bushfire in the nearby Kwinana.

So it's understandable that, especially in the hot summer weather like today, many of us feel that we have too much sun that less sunlight is preferable.

Even at night, living in the suburb of a metropolitan city like Perth, we are surrounded by artificial lights. No wonder many choose to escape to the outback to enjoy 'darkness' and witness the beauty of the night sky without being hindered by our excessive artificial lights.

Jesus, however, addressed people in ancient time where light—artificial light—was not as abundant and excessive as it is today. The things that we take for granted in modern life; the things that many of us would like to have less of, were items that people in his time couldn't live without.

For example, people were very appreciative of anything that could bring light into darkness, especially at night-time. Lamp, therefore, was essential because, without it, people would simply sit in complete darkness in their houses at night. The same thing with salt. It was used not only for cooking, but also for preserving food—there was no such thing as a refrigerator back then. At the time, the Romans sometimes also used salt to pay their workers. Even the word, *salary*, comes from the word, *salarium*, in Latin that means *salt*. A person who was not worthy of his *salt* was not worthy to receive his wages.ⁱⁱ

So when Jesus talked about salt and lamp, he talked about items that were essential in his time. Salt and lamp were the ‘must-have’ items in every household at the time. They were the ‘equivalent’ of today’s microwave or washing machine in Australia!

So, to be the salt and the light of the world is not optional. People in the world would suffer and die if Jesus’ followers stop being the salt and the light of the world.

The teaching about being the salt and light of the world is thus not an advice or suggestion; it is a new commandment from Jesus; it is a requirement for those who follow him. We may fail along the way, but that should not be an excuse for us to stop being the salt and light of the world.

Once, the grass in my backyard didn’t grow as well as I hoped it would. There were some dead patches that were covered mostly by moss and not by grass.

I tried everything in my knowledge to get the grass growing in those areas again. I got rid of the moss. I watered the areas regularly. I sprinkled them with fertiliser. Yet, nothing changed.

One day, a couple from my previous church, who were avid gardeners, came to my house and told me the reason why the grass wasn't growing well, regardless of my effort. They said that there wasn't enough sunlight! The branches from the trees nearby blocked the sunlight from reaching those areas in the garden.

So, I cut some branches from the trees to let more sunlight in and, *voila*; they were right! Within a few weeks, there were already improvements. The grass in the now well-lit area grew quicker and it started covering some of the barren patches.

Just like the grass in my backyard needed sunlight to grow, without us living our life as the light of the word, others could also suffer and even die.

So Jesus didn't expect anything less from his followers. On the contrary, he expected more. Those who dared to follow him must go beyond what the Pharisees and the Scribes had done.

Now, the Pharisees and the Scribes were the guardians of the Jewish tradition at the time. The Pharisees, more specifically, preserved their tradition by adhering strictly to the words of the Jewish law.

Jesus, on the other hand, gave fresh perspective into the words of the law. He captured the 'spirit' of the law and asked his followers to follow the 'spirit' than the words of the law.

Following the 'spirit' of the law, however, is far more difficult than following the law word-by-word. For example, to follow the commandment: to love others as we love ourselves, is difficult because what is required is a change of life; a change of heart, and not simply a change one's habit to suit the words of the law.

This was the trap that the Pharisees and the Scribes had often fallen into. By adhering to the words of the law, they often missed the true intention of the law, which is to help people to live a life of compassion and generosity; to uphold justice and righteousness; in other words, to be like God who is compassionate, generous, just, and righteous.

No wonder that in our reading from Isaiah, God declares that our light will only shine when we show compassion to and solidarity with those in need.

The people of Israel in the time of the Old Testament, however, had often failed to live up to this expectation. Like many of the Pharisees, their adherence to their religious ritual often did not have any real impact to their day-to-day living.

Like many Pharisees, many people in Israel back then thought that they could find favour in God's eyes simply by observing the rituals; by fasting and offering sacrifices in the temple regularly, but without paying attention to their social obligations towards the weak in the land.

But, in our Isaiah's reading, God declares that their observance of the rituals has been rendered useless. Why? Because, once they left the temple or the places of rituals, they did not follow God's covenant to live the way God wanted them to. No wonder that the Prophet in Isaiah reminded the people of Israel that God prefers *right living* than *ritual obedience*.

Friends, our light will indeed shine not when we only observe our religious ritual, but when we also live the kind of life that God wants us to live; when we devote our life to be with those who are marginalised; when we commit our life to free those under any kind of oppression; when we show generosity towards those who need our help the most.

No, the world will not see our light if the only thing that we do is praying or fasting or going to church on Sunday or reading the Bible regularly. I'm not saying that these things are not important. They are very important for our spiritual life, but they don't worth much if they do not result in our living according to the life that God has shown to us in Jesus; if they don't result in our solidarity with and generosity towards those who are marginalised and oppressed in our world.

So, praying is not enough if we do not actively seek what we ask from God in our prayer. Reading the Bible is not enough if we do not shape our life according to the teachings that we learn in the Bible. Going to the church is not enough if, after we leave the church, we still treat other people with evil intention and not with the respect and love they deserve.

Friends, remember: we don't light a lamp and hide it under a basket. Likewise, we must not hide our light by keeping it in our house or in the church. We must bring our light to the people outside of our familiar places; outside of our comfort zone—those dark places where our life will give the desperately needed light to the souls who live there.

Amen.

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

ⁱⁱ See Exegesis, preaching suggestions, and illustrations based on Matthew 5:13-16 by John R. Brokhoff excerpted from Preaching the Parables, Cycle A (SermonStudio).