

SALT AND LIGHT

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 6th February 2005

Matthew 5: 13-20; Isaiah 58

“You are the salt of the earth” comes, not as a command or suggestion from Jesus, but as a statement of fact. “You *are* the salt of the earth.” He goes on to say that we can be good salt or bad salt, but either way, we’re it - we, the people of God (individually and collectively) are the salt of the earth. If we fail to have the effect that salt is supposed to have, that’s it. There’s no back up plan - *we* are the salt of the earth.

Similarly Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” Again, we’re it. If our light is hidden, we’re a wasted light, burning fuel for no benefit, but we’re still the only light. *We* are the light of the world.

These sayings in the Sermon on the Mount are the link between the beatitudes - Jesus’ illustrations of the kind of characteristics God really values in people - and his discussion of the law of Israel, the beginning of which reads, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law; I have come to fulfil it.”

“You are the salt of the earth.” Eugene Peterson [The Message] translates it thus:
“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste Godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bring out the God-colours in the world.”

God is present and active in the world all the time. But God acts through us. The whole world is full of the presence of God, but if there are no groups dancing to God’s song, then the presence of God will go largely undetected. Just as many people can barely taste the flavours in their food unless there is some salt to bring them out, so too the Godliness of life will be almost undetectable unless we are living it out boldly.

We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. The purpose of our life together is to bring out the flavour and the colour of life, the zest of life - the godliness of creation.

Sometimes our saltiness will enrich the good that is always present. Sometimes it will enable the preservation of the good that might otherwise be lost (re use of salt for preservation before refrigeration and chemical preservatives). And sometimes it will sting in the open wounds of the world – painful, but healing nevertheless.

If we lose our saltiness, how will anyone taste godliness? How is anyone going to see beyond the hardness of this society? If we do not mourn the hurts of the world, if we are not humble, merciful and pure of heart, if we do not hunger and thirst for justice and

strive for peace, how will anyone see beyond the callous, winner-takes-all competitive culture in which we live?

The law alone, the written word, cannot be salt for the earth. The word must take flesh in us. As Isaiah made so clear in our first reading, when people just go by the written word they end up with just another version of death. People can fast and offer the required prayers without living a word of it. Pedantic law-keeping is not life. God is not the least bit impressed with anyone's religious observances if they continue to live without mercy, compassion or integrity.

And yet, says Jesus, I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. It's just that we do not fulfil the law by counting each commandment and ticking them off religiously. We fulfil the law as we live out of the mind of Christ that is being formed in us, as we live in gratitude for God's grace in us. By all means read the scriptures, meditate on the law of the Lord, contemplate the God revealed therein. But don't do it to memorise lists of do's and don'ts to be frigidly executed.

Do it so that the mind of Christ may be more and more formed in you and may burst forth in joyous living, in full-flavoured passion for life and compassion for all who share the earth with you. In so doing you will be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. And in doing so you will be living out the law - your righteousness will far exceed the most nit-picking legalist - and you will be embraced as children of the Kingdom to the glory of our loving God who lives and reigns in all.

I will end by reading a paraphrase of the OT Reading for today...

From the prophet Isaiah (brief background info given here): Put into contemporary language with a tiny bit of "poetic license", it faithfully captures the sense of what the prophet was proclaiming in a manner that is striking, and makes clear how we should live and what "religious practices" God appreciates.

Paraphrases of the Scripture Lections

6 February 2005 – Year A

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Isaiah 58: 1-9a, (9b-12)

God has told me to shout until you people hear;
to hammer home the message until it gets through.
You are God's people, but God regards you as traitors.
Listen to what God has to say about your sins:

“Day after day, you look good:
you turn up to worship and pay attention to my teachings.
You act like a people who want to do what is right;
like a people who want to obey to the letter.
You ask for directions from me before you do anything,
and you seem enthusiastic about getting closer to me.

“Do you want to know why your religious behaviour turns me off?
Do you want to know why I ignore your fasting and bowing?
I’ll tell you why - you put on a great performance of it all,
but then you go straight back to feathering your own nest
and ripping off your workers in the process.

“When you fast, it just makes you irritable and violent;
and when you behave like that, I’ll just hang up on you.

“Do you really think this is what I like to see:
a day of pious misery?
black clothes, long faces and crocodile tears?
giving up chocolate and ice cream?
Do you think that’s worship?
Do you think that pleases me?
Give me a break!

“Do you want to know what I’d really like to see:
dismantle the structures of injustice;
take your feet of the throats of the poor;
stop jailing the victims of unfair laws;
and quit plundering nature’s resources.

“Do you want to know what else I’d like to see:
open your tables to the hungry;
open your hearts and your homes to the refugees;
open your wardrobes to those without clothes;
and don’t go hiding every time you see someone in need.

“Do that, and I’ll put your name up in lights!
Do that and our relationship will be healed in an instant!
I’ll put you under my personal protection;
anyone who attacks you will have to deal with me, the LORD!
I’ll be on hand to respond whenever you need me;
just say the word, and I’ll be there for you.

“If you abandon all forms of exploitation,
and avoid bad-mouthing others to gain an edge;
if you share what you have with those in need,
and respond to the real needs of suffering communities;

then you'll find that the world will light up for you
and life will be one beautiful day after another.

“I, the LORD, will always be there to guide you;
even in the grip of drought,
I'll keep you healthy and well fed.
You'll be like an irrigated vineyard with it's own deep bore,
green and lush and full of life!

“Your ruined houses will be renovated and new;
you'll be able to restore the homes
that have been in your families for generations.
You'll get a reputation for making dreams possible,
for enabling everyone to find a good place to live.

General Prayer: (Used at the conclusion to Communion, with blessing to follow)

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,
for your mercy and justice are a light in our darkness
and your Word outlasts even heaven and earth,
which you have created.

Before the ages, your wisdom destined us for glory
and you have revealed your depths to us through the Spirit.
When we failed in righteousness
and turned our worship into a mask
hiding our oppression, contempt and disregard of others,
you rejected our fasts and prayers
and sent prophets to denounce our rebellion
and call us back to your ways.

In your child, Jesus, and him crucified,
we have seen the light of the world.
You raised him from the dead,
and through him, gave us your Spirit,
who has begun the rebuilding of our integrity
on the ancient foundations of justice, mercy and compassion.
Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Blessing:

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Let your light shine before others

that seeing your justice, mercy and compassion, they may give glory to God.

The blessing of God almighty...

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ. Amen.