



Sermon

Be Wise and Let Your Light Shine

Matthew 5:13-20; 1 Cor 2:1-12

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Today's gospel reading starts partway through the Sermon on the Mount which has often been called Christ's Manifesto. Recently, I was excited to read the Passion Translation of these verses. It draws on insights from Aramaic and Hebrew and has many fascinating footnotes. I learnt the Aramaic word for comfort is *nethbayoon*, which can mean "to see the face of what (or who) you long for." And that added another depth of understanding to the account we had last week of Simeon in the Temple. He was expecting to see the consolation or comfort of Israel – the Christ. When he held the baby Jesus in his arms he said, "With my own eyes I have seen your salvation..." He had seen the face of the one he longed for - he was comforted.

As I read the first nine verses of the Sermon on the Mount, do you hear Jesus' words of comfort for the lowly, the oppressed the troubled, his words of consolation and hope?

"What wealth is offered to you when you feel your spiritual poverty! For there is no charge to enter the realm of heaven's kingdom. What delight comes to you when you wait upon the Lord! For you will find what you long for. What blessing comes to you when gentleness lives in you! For you will inherit the earth. How enriched you are when you crave righteousness! For you will be surrounded with fruitfulness. How satisfied you are when you demonstrate tender mercy! For tender mercy will be demonstrated to you. What bliss you experience when your heart is pure! For then your eyes will open to see more and more of God. How blessed you are when you make peace! For then you will be recognized as a true child of God. How enriched you are when you bear the wounds of being persecuted for doing what is right! For that is when you experience the realm of heaven's kingdom. How ecstatic you can be when people insult and persecute you and speak all kinds of cruel lies about you because of your love for me! So leap for joy—since your heavenly reward is great. For you are being rejected the same way the prophets were before you."¹

The Sermon on the Mount is challenging. Jesus raises the ethical standard very high – how should we understand it? The view which makes best sense to me is that he tells us what Kingdom life looks like. It is not about earning our acceptance. This Kingdom life is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus died for our sins on the cross. When we put our trust in him, God forgives us and gives us new life. We are filled with the Spirit. It is from this transformation and empowering, that the Kingdom life can start to grow.

¹ Matthew 5:3-11 [The Passion Translation]

Paul's words in the Epistle reading could apply to this passage:

"... no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

... who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. ²

Jesus paints a picture of Kingdom life which is upside by the world's values. If we are to understand him, we need his Spirit to give us insight into the things of God. It is an example of St Anselm's dictum, "*Credo ut intelligam* - I believe so I may understand." Jesus gives us more than laws; he gives us promises of power to fulfil all that he asks of us. The emphasis is not on outward duty but on the inward transformation of our hearts by grace. God's kingdom is offered to those who will learn the ways of Christ and offer themselves to him in full surrender.

Now let us continue with the today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount from the Passion Translation – Matthew 5:13-20.

"Your lives are like salt among the people. But if you, like salt, become bland, how can your 'saltiness' be restored? Flavourless salt is good for nothing and will be thrown out and trampled on by others.

"Your lives light up the world. Let others see your light from a distance, for how can you hide a city that stands on a hilltop? And who would light a lamp and then hide it in an obscure place? Instead, it's placed where everyone in the house can benefit from its light. So don't hide your light! Let it shine brightly before others, so that the commendable things you do will shine as light upon them, and then they will give their praise to your Father in heaven."

"If you think I've come to set aside the Law of Moses or the writings of the prophets, you're mistaken. I have come to fulfil and bring to perfection all that has been written. Indeed, I assure you, as long as heaven and earth endure, not even the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with until its purpose is complete. So whoever violates even the least important of the commandments, and teaches others to do so, will be the least esteemed in the realm of heaven's kingdom. But whoever obeys them and teaches their truths to others will be greatly esteemed in the realm of heaven's kingdom. For I tell you, unless your lives are more pure and full of integrity than the religious scholars and the Pharisees you will never experience the realm of heaven's kingdom."

Light to the World

Jesus also spoke about our being the light of the world. "Light" is often used as a metaphor for teachings that bring revelation to people. Light can also represent the presence of God (e.g., "the light of his countenance").

Jesus who is **the** light of the world makes **us** to be the light of the world. How? Because he is the light of God within us.

And light is to shine forth. That's the purpose of being a light. He explains the obvious by saying you don't light a lamp in your house and then cover it with a bowl; you put it on a stand so its light can shine forth. So too, a hilltop city cannot be hidden – it is plain to see. The light of Christ in us will shine out and give glory to God the Father. If there was any doubt about whether this is about human effort or Spirit-inspired fruit, doesn't that make it plain? People will give glory to God the Father, not to the sweating disciple who is trying to attain the Kingdom through good works!

² 1 Cor 2:9-12

Salt of the Earth

Jesus' other analogy is salt. We have all heard it before so I won't labour the point. Salt is used to preserve food and to flavour food. Even though the percentage of salt in a recipe is tiny yet it makes a big difference to the taste. We need not be surprised at being a minority in society. Jesus said we would be.

When Jesus spoke of salt becoming tasteless the word in both Aramaic and Greek has a dominant meaning of foolishness. So salt that has lost its flavour is foolish, and salt that keeps its flavour is wise. The Jewish teachers also equated salt with wisdom. Let us retain our saltiness – our wisdom -and not become bland and foolish in our society.

It was a common practice in the time of Jesus to put salt on the wick of a lamp to increase its brightness. To anyone of that culture, the association would imply that the "salt" of wisdom will make our lights shine even brighter.³

Jesus declares we have a role of flavouring and preventing decay in society – if we keep true to our nature. If not - we are foolish and worthless.

I want to apply this salt and light idea to telling people about Jesus. In NZ and much of the western world, we are too silent: we try hard to hide our saltiness and shield our lights under any sort of bowl, bushel or billy we can find. Can we change that?

Over the last 5 years, the Hope Project has been helping get the gospel out to every household. These booklets are well presented and have delivered to every available mailbox. They help to have the opportunity to engage in conversations naturally and without being objectionable; to ask questions and help others think about their faith.

Most of us think we cannot persuade people with eloquent arguments. That is all right: in the epistle, Paul said he did not preach with clever words and expressions. It wasn't the cleverness of his rhetoric which convinced them. He wasn't his great wisdom. Rather he says it was the simple message of the crucified saviour. He didn't speak with great eloquence but in weakness and fear – can you identify with that? I can! At present we have an opportunity: The Hope Project has another booklet to go out this Easter. This time, churches are being asked to deliver the booklets. We are looking for volunteers to walk in this area and put booklets in letterboxes – it's good exercise and you are spreading a good message.

Let's take courage and start to open up to people. Maybe we start by praying that God would use us: remember the "use me" prayer? Try praying, "Lord, use me," in the morning. You could pray that God would give you natural opportunities to have a conversation about spiritual matters. You might pray that the Holy Spirit would make your words count. How about praying for those you will speak to later on, that God would prepare their hearts and minds? Let's be salt and light to our community.

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³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975. W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, Tyndale reference library, 2001, Lamp, Lampstand. 797–8. Cited by the Passion Translation footnote on Matthew 5:13