

Reflection for Fellowship@10

5th February 2023

5th Sunday After the Epiphany

Text: Matthew 5:13-20

Title: Salt, Light & Law

Introduction

The Gospel reading for the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany utilises two beautifully simple yet effectual symbols to encourage Jesus' followers to engage in the world they live in with purpose. Matthew Chapter 5 verses 13 – 20 consists of three images or metaphors:

Salt, Light and Law

Starting with salt –

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Then the light –

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

And then the Law -

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This morning I want to begin by reflecting on verses 17 to 20.

The book of St. Matthew has long been regarded as one of the most interesting and perhaps illuminating gospels of the New Testament. Most scholars' opinions on the Gospel of Matthew are: *"Anyone who has studied the Gospel of Matthew in depth will invariably express an opinion concerning the religious bias contained in the book. Its "Jewishness" is obvious; but one cannot overlook the harsh polemics against the Pharisees and other Jewish authorities. There is generally much disagreement among scholars with regard to this question."*

In short many interpreters blame Matthew of being "anti-Jewish". So, we all need to be careful when we study the Gospel of Matthew. Judaism is our closest neighbour. We share Scripture. We share sacred sites. We share belief in the same God. However, the irony is the very closeness has also made us enemies over the years.

We share one tradition that we interpret in different ways, because we do not share Jesus, or at least not as the Christ. His name divides Jews and Christians, the same way it divides the Bible in two.

At the core is the Christian claim that Jesus is God incarnate, which for Judaism violates the first commandment. **"You shall have no other gods before me."** Exodus 20:3

Barbara Brown Taylor, a best-selling author, teacher and Episcopal priest commenting on Matthew 5:17-20,¹ *"This is a fascinating passage for all sorts of reasons.*

*In the **first** place, it suggests that Jesus never intended to break with Judaism. If anything, he meant for his followers to become the most righteous Jews the world had ever seen.*

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor is a best-selling author, teacher, and Episcopal priest. Her first memoir, *Leaving Church*, won an Author of the Year award from the Georgia Writers Association in 2006. Her next three books earned places on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Taylor has served on the faculties of Piedmont College, Emory University, Mercer University, Columbia Seminary, Oblate School of Theology, and the Certificate in Theological Studies program at Arrendale State Prison for Women in Alto, Georgia..

*In the **second** place, the passage raises serious questions about Christianity's dismissal of Torah. With the possible exception of at least eight of the Ten Commandments, most Christians no longer observe the law of Moses. We regard Torah as fundamental to Judaism, not Christianity. Jews believe in Torah. We believe in Jesus, who freed us from the law."*²

Really?

But that's not the Jesus of Matthew 5. The Jesus of Matthew 5 came to fulfill the law, not to abolish it.

There are real differences between Judaism and Christianity. I think some Christians have overlooked those differences more than Jews have.

After Jesus announcing his total loyalty to Torah in the middle of Matthew 5, Jesus went on to say – not once but six times – ***“You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...”***
“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Whether we attribute this pronouncement to Matthew or to Jesus, the truth of it lies in the word **‘fulfil,’** a word Matthew uses 16 times in his Gospel to describe how Jesus brought Scripture to life.

There are clear differences between Judaism and Christianity. Some Christians might want to ignore them and choose to highlight those things in common.

By the way, I don't subscribe to *super-session-ism*.

Super-session-ism describes the theological conviction that the Christian Church has superseded the Jewish people, assuming their role as God's covenanted people, Israel.

I believe in interfaith dialogues. However, authentic interfaith dialogues do not play down the differences. We accept and seek to understand the differences, not to minimise them.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, 'The Seeds of HEAVEN: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, pg. 3

While we honour the differences that might divide us – both in the church and between church and synagogue – it’s worth remembering that we share one more thing, and that is a call to exceeding righteousness. *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” – Matthew 5:20*

I would like Barbara Brown Taylor to have the last words on Matthew 5:17-20, *“In the best of both our traditions, the righteousness has never been a matter of following rules but of honouring relationships – with aliens as well as kin, with enemies as well as allies.*

The Torah of Moses and the torah of Jesus both agree on that.

When we honour our neighbours – when we love them as ourselves – then, and only then, are we ready to discover what the law, the prophets, and the gospel are all about.”³

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”

These words follow immediately after the Sermon on the Mount – the Beatitudes – where Jesus speaks of “them” and “they.” Those who mourn. Those who are meek and peacemakers and so forth.

Not, one day you *will* be.

Not that you *should* be.

Not, *if* you do such and such, *then* you will be salt and light.

No, right here and right now, you *are* the salt of the earth, you *are* the light of the world.

In fact, Jesus is saying, "Go, be salt and light."

Let’s be clear, Jesus is not blindsiding his disciples (5:1) with a new mission and a new identity for which they have had no prior invitation. The task of bringing flavour to the world was not a new one for Israel.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, ‘The Seeds of HEAVEN: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, Pg. 7

As for light, Israel had long regarded God as the source of light for daily life (Ps. 119: 105) and light itself (Ps. 36:9). Israel's portrait gallery had long contained the picture, centuries old, of the Servant of Yahweh, who was to be a light to the nations through redemptive servanthood.

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples." (Isaiah. 42:6: 49:6, 51:4).

Now Jesus' listeners, living in the context of Roman domination, would probably have known that Rome saw itself as a "light to the world." Jesus' message to the disciples is that living by the Beatitudes is a light to the world, not living by an imperial domination system (Reid, 36).

The disciples are to take on the mission of the Servant of Yahweh from Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, to be a light to the nations. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." This word **YOU** is emphatic in both verses. The intent may be to contrast Matthean Christians with their counterparts in the synagogue down the street.

There is an implied imperative in both indicative statements.

"Be salt. Be light. Be who you already have been called to be and are capable, by the power of God, of being in and for the world."

When Jesus tells his disciples to "be salt," he is drawing on several Old Testament uses for salt. It was used for seasoning, preservation, and purifying (2 Kg. 2:19-22).

It was used to ratify covenants (Num. 18:29; 2 Chr. 13:5) and in liturgical functions (Ex. 30:35; Lev. 2:13; Ezek. 43:24; Ezra 6:9). To eat salt with someone signified a bond of friendship and loyalty (Ezra 4:14; Acts 1:4). Salt scattered on a conquered city reinforced its devastation (Jg. 9:45).⁴ In rabbinic metaphorical language, salt also connoted wisdom (Hill, 115). Today, salt adds flavour to food, cures food, creates traction on icy roads, and can serve as an antiseptic in wounds.

Biblical scholars have puzzled over whether salt can lose its flavour. Since salt is a very stable, non-reactive compound, the only way it can lose its flavour is by being diluted with water.

New Testament scholar Barbara Reid comments that 5:13b, coming on the heels of Jesus' exhortation to rejoice when persecuted (5:11-12) is a warning to the disciples not to let their ardour dissipate under the pressures of persecution (Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 35).

Do you know 'lose its flavour' (*moranthe*) could also be rendered 'become foolish?' There may be a sense that if the disciples allow their wisdom (salt) to be diluted by the values of the surrounding culture, it will be indistinguishable from them and therefore worthless. Its ability to season, preserve, and purify will be lost.

You are the light of the world.

We are not called to impose our light on others through political or religious imperialism or through narcissistic overexposure. But let's not hide our light. Just because some Christians grandstand doesn't mean we should not be the lampstand.

⁴ Barbara Reid, O.P., *The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, The Gospel According to Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005) pg. 35

And let us not be diffident about shining a light on Jesus. Jesus said emphatically, “You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.” When Jesus made this statement, he wanted to make clear our position and responsibility in the world.

As followers of Jesus, we must understand that to be salt, to bring taste into the world – We are called to seek justice, mercy, kindness, advocacy for those who are powerless and voiceless.

To be salt in this day and age is to call out things which we disagree with – and to seek to make change. Perhaps, in some cases, yes to put our feet with our voices and protest. But never to tear down another person.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Now I want you to turn to the person sitting next to you. Make sure you know the person, if not please introduce yourself. You have a partner? Look at the person and say...

“Rob/Ruth you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.”

And then repeat that to your partner. Once again: **You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.**

Let others see your deeds of love and justice in order that they may come to know and to praise God.

Amen.