

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's lectionary reading takes us to the place in Matthew's account where Jesus has just uttered the words of the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. The purpose of what Jesus says here is to clarify the meaning of his teaching and to distinguish it from any false instruction which might lead his followers astray.

Jesus speaks of salt because Israel herself had been likened to salt; Jesus is now teaching his disciples that they are founding the new Israel. The emerging church is to be the *light of the world* and *the city set on a hill*. Importantly, however, that light will be seen in the good works of his faithful followers, not in mere words. Jesus does not say that his followers *will some day* become the salt of the earth; *they already are* that salt. Because of that, "their words and deeds have import:

"And as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are expected to be the activity of God in the world...to live out our identity as salt and light," because knowledge without action perpetuates racism, sexism, oppression of the poor, the ostracizing of the marginalized and the disregard of the hungry."

When the Jews were forced into exile by the Assyrians in the 8th century B.C., they came to be scattered and disoriented, but even if those who did not return are now lost to history, "Jewish faith understands these hidden Jews to have remembered the basic moral practices of Torah, and as such were a preserving force in the world."

In addressing his audience as "the salt of the earth," he is reminding them that "Torah observance is not just a 'religious thing,' not a set of odd Jewish practices involving seafood and pork and other foods that many non-Jews have no trouble with but rather that "Torah observance is good for the world. It makes communities gentler and more orderly. It makes human beings kinder and more tolerant." This is part of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would bring a blessing to the whole world:

"The eternal Torah is not about moral rigorism or brittle rigidity. Eternal Torah is about the simple, and absolute applicability of the moral principles that should govern our life together...in the words of the prophet Micah: "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

The Torah was also seen as "salt" for Israel, so when Jesus says that his followers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he is making a shocking claim for anyone with a Torah-focused faith; it would have been viewed as blasphemous to claim that one's disciples were the actual reality of the Torah in their time. But what Jesus is really doing here is informing his disciples that his mission is now theirs, and it is a public mission; "it happens in the open...and benefits everyone." If, however, we see Jesus'

words as “requirement rather than blessing...command rather than commissioning,” the statement that the disciples are the light of the world can only rightly be viewed as “sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning,” not a demand or a requirement or a necessity.

The words are clear: not “you *are to become* the light of the world” or you “*must become* the light of the world,” but rather, “you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.”

He also speaks of ‘righteousness;’ in fact, the whole of the passage is a form of commentary on the meaning of righteousness. That of the Pharisees and scribes was based on *the law and the prophets*. And although in one sense Jesus has come to found a new Israel and will make serious criticisms of the law and the prophets, he has nonetheless come to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, not to abolish them. And by this he seems to mean that he is promoting the kind of righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Fulfillment means that “the law and the prophets are not only completed, but (that) the Jesus event exceeds them.”

The Sermon on the Mount is “Jesus’ masterpiece.” All of the themes begun here are amplified in the rest of the story of the life of Jesus as told by Matthew. And, again, the primary theme of the sermon is “righteousness or justice.” The Beatitudes “point out God’s favor toward humanity rather than God’s demands.” The only demand we witness here is the call to follow Jesus’ words, because, in effect, those words are the new Torah. The distinction between the Law itself and its “fulfillment” is that the latter provides his followers with an exploration of the *meaning* of the law; it does not call for its discontinuation.

Despite the fact that many people feel that the Sermon on the Mount is a “call to impossible ethical heights,” what Jesus is really teaching through the Beatitudes is that our righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees because their practices had become merely external and perfunctory, cut off from the radical love of neighbor and God that is at the heart of Judaism.”

Jesus was starting a kind of revolution but one which differed markedly from the other forms of revolution that were appearing from time to time in the first century. He had to show the Jews of his day that this movement really was the fulfillment of all that Israel had believed and longed for, and he had to show that his followers were really living by the new way he was advocating. He needed to remind his compatriots that what he was preaching was “the reality toward which Israel’s whole life and tradition had pointed.” Otherwise it would lack any appeal for devout Jews and would betray the very people whom Jesus had come to rescue. He was calling the Israel of his day to be *Israel indeed* now that he was there to lead them. God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, but she was behaving like everyone else with her power politics,...factional squabbling,...and militant rebellions.”

How could God keep the world from going bad (as salt can do under certain conditions) if Israel had lost its special mission? This is one extended plea for the people of Israel to return to the *true meaning* of the Law and the prophets, and he will lead the way. In the words of the Psalmist:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

**to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,**

**to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?**

**Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;**

**when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?**

**Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;**

**your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.**

**Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.**

AMEN

Sources

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