

Matthew 5 13-20

Matthew 5: 13-30

I wonder how you heard today's Gospel? Did it have an admonishing tone? Did you hear it as invitation? The words of this text seem straightforward but as with all scriptural passages, it rests in a complex web of references to the Old Testament.

The writer of Matthew's gospel was an evangelist whose express purpose was to inform his readers that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. It was vitally important to him to reveal Jesus' Jewishness. He was writing for a divided community where there was some criticism of Jesus' actions and teaching. So how is this writer to deal with Jesus' actions that challenge prescriptive law? This is where Jesus' teaching becomes provocative in his time. Especially when he claims not to have come to abolish the law, but not one stroke of a letter he says will pass from the law until all is accomplished. What will be accomplished will be far beyond what can be contained in any written form.

Commentators note that Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus giving particular significance to words from the prophet Hosea: 'What I want is mercy, not sacrifice'. One of the strong themes of Matthew's gospel is that its readers should understand their sin and turn

towards God. That theme applies to modern listeners as well. God desires mercy!

Last week I talked about Jesus being the embodiment of God's desire to see goodness prevail. Jesus came to teach us how to live. So what does Jesus urge us toward when we are told our purpose is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

At first glance, the identification with such inanimate objects feels uninspiring. But it is necessary to attend to multiple layers in these images.

While salt doesn't lose its saltiness, its impact may be diluted by other inclusions. If it becomes impure, it is not adequate for savouring or preserving. There is a link here between the idea of distinctiveness and purity of purpose in people and the failing of adulterated salt.

Jesus makes an emphatic statement he has not come to abandon the law as set down in the Torah. Rather, he brings a new and dynamic energy to the interpretation of the law. He moves away from prescriptive legalism and he surpasses the rule-bound righteousness of his critics. He sets his sights in new direction that was focused in the love of God.

So, where do Jesus' statements leave you and I? How do we live into a contemporary understanding of being Salt and Light and striving for righteousness? What are we called to?

I think we are called to behaviour that is just as vital and challenging as that demonstrated by Jesus. I have shared with you before the notion of synthesis. Two opposing points view can be termed synthesis and antithesis. Out of the tension between these fixed points something new can emerge; a synthesis.

In Jesus' society, the law prescribed behaviours. There were 613 commandments for living. Some stated positive actions to be taken, others were negative commandments, actions to abstain from. Jesus' critics claimed he abandoned these laws. That he represented the antithesis of their laws. He did not; he created a new interpretation the Law. **He created a dynamic synthesis that was born out of mercy and love of God.**

Is it possible for us to abandon our rules of convention in order to maintain the distinctiveness of salt, and the light of prophetic example? Can we let go and strive for synthesis?

I can only speak for myself but I can say that I am called to struggle with my own weakness. As I also said last week we can only rest in the Spirit. Jesus tells us how to behave but how do we get to that

place of new growth? I can lift my eyes and look to Jesus' example for inspiration.

He had an intimate relationship with the Father and he fed this relationship by withdrawing for prayer. His ministry was intense and demanding. His example of time alone to rest in God, speaks to all of us. We are not open to the point of invitation and creativity unless we are listening to God. **Nobody needs to hear these words more than me!**

To step into the space of creative synthesis we need to be willing to be vulnerable. What a frightening place this is. Rules can bring us security and predictability. Assessing new situations and responding to the call to be distinctive salt and light is to embrace risk and reach out to God for courage.

Think of points of tension in Jesus' ministry. I wonder how he felt when the Pharisees asked him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? He asked for a coin. I wonder how he felt facing an angry mob ready to stone an adulterous woman. He asked the one without sin, to cast the first stone. While the events in our daily living do not carry the same weight, we constantly face situations that call us to dig into our reserves in order to respond according to Jesus' creative expressions of righteousness.

Did you hear today's gospel is an invitation to each of us to seek a depth of relationship with God that might us to be more than we currently are?

These words from a prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila tell us that the project of our **becoming** is urgent because:

Christ has no body now but yours

No hands but yours

No feet but yours

Yours are the eyes through which

Christ's compassion must look over the world

Yours are the feet with which

He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which

He is to bless us now.¹

AMEN

¹ Rolheiser, R. This prayer cited in notes for Chapter 4 p248

Byrne, Brendan. *Lifting the Burden Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* St Paul's Publications Australia 2004 Passim

Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Holy Longing* Random House New York 1999