

SERMON FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY – YEAR A

Thank you, Father, for making yourself known to us through your word. We ask you to encourage us in our faith, so that we may be ready to serve you; for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the great sadness' of my ministry is when I come across people whose view God is one of a wrathful, severe deity. A God who tallies up our wrongdoings and finds fault with every little sin we commit and is more than ready to dole out punishment on us. And even if we are repentant, this God seems reluctant to forgive let alone love us.

And while it is true that people may well get that view of God either from their upbringing or perhaps even by reading Scripture, when you look through the Bible there is far more in it which speaks of God's mercy, God's grace and God's love for people.

Two weeks ago we read that Jesus began his ministry with a call to repentance, but it was not a call to save us from the wrath of vengeful God, but is rather a call to turn to God for forgiveness and to come into relationship with the God of mercy and grace. Jesus points us to a positive relationship with God based on trust and love, not of fear and retribution.

And we see this positive view of Jesus towards those who follow him in our gospel reading for today, we pick up Matthew's account just after the Jesus has given the Beatitudes, which are the beginning teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. In today's section Jesus uses two metaphors to describe the type of people who are considered blessed in the Beatitudes. They are the salt and the light of the world.

The first metaphor is salt. In biblical times, every village had a communal oven. The common fuel for the oven was something that was far more plentiful than wood: animal droppings, most often camel or donkey. One of the duties each young girl had to learn was to collect the dung, mix salt in it, and mould it into patties to be left in the sun to dry. In many poorer countries, such dung patties are still used as fuel even to this day.

A slab of salt was placed at the base of the communal oven and the salted dung patty put on top. Salt has properties which cause the dung to burn, but more slowly and more efficiently. Eventually the salt slab became useless because the component within it which caused the dung to burn was gradually leached out of it by the heat.

To be salt for the earth-oven was to make things burn. So in effect, Jesus is saying, "You, my disciples; are the ingredient that keeps the Kingdom of God burning." Or to use a modern idiom, "You are the fuel to get things cooking."

If Jesus' disciples do this, they will also be "light of the earth." Light is a common theme throughout the gospels. And the light of course is opposed to darkness. The metaphor of believers as light assumes that the world is dark or in darkness. Yet the call to be light is not a rejection of the dark world. It is a command to shed light in the darkness, to bring hope to the hopeless. And so in talking about being salt and light in the world, Jesus, is telling his disciples not that they should be salt and light for the transformation of the world, but that they **already are** by being part of his company.

In the second half of today's gospel, Jesus talks about the law and the prophets. The law was the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures or what we refer to as the Old Testament. One of the questions that occupied much of Matthew's attention and has been a problem throughout Christian history is the relationship between the Christian Church and the Old Testament, especially the Old Testament Law. Matthew is the only gospel writer who deals with this question in any detail, and this is most because the community that he wrote his gospel for was a Jewish-Christian community. So, it is quite clear what the answer to the question of the relationship between the Christian community and the Old Testament law was in Matthew. Jesus states that he did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfil the law. Jesus states that not one not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law before the whole purpose of the Law is fulfilled.

So, does Jesus mean that the whole law must remain 'as is', that you can't even change the smallest part of it? This verse is often highlighted by those who believe we should read the Bible literally. After all, Jesus does say, "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." That last phrase is very important though, "until all is accomplished", because how is all accomplished? Well, in all the gospels, 'all is accomplished' in Jesus. So, this suggests that the law is accomplished in Jesus himself. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And we will see next week what this means, when we see that Jesus re-interprets the law that is fulfilled and accomplished in him.

Today's gospel reading is an affirmation of our faith and ministry, both as individual believers, but also as a community of faith. Jesus doesn't say to us that we are like salt and light or we are called to be salt and light, but actually, we are salt and light. We need to remember that it only takes a little bit of salt in cooking to make a huge difference in how a meal tastes, and we know that in a dark place, even a little bit of light can make the difference between seeing where we are going and running into something. And we are salt and light by following the one who is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, the one who is the fulfillment of all God's hopes for the world and our hopes for ourselves, the God of love and grace.