

Reflection for 4th Sunday after Epiphany by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying”

This verse is the beginning of the first of Matthew’s great ‘discourses’, generally referred to as the ‘Sermon on the Mount,’ and it presents Jesus as the Teacher.

When you think of the “Sermon on the Mount” what mental images does it bring to mind. Is Jesus standing on a hillside with a vast crowd in front of him? Look carefully the text of Matthew’s gospel and you get a slightly different picture. The crowd was pressing in on Jesus so he withdrew to teach—an act which let those who were the most sincerely interested gather to listen.

As one commentary puts it, *“When He was seated” expresses the symbol of the rabbi who sat to teach, a phrase similar to our references to a professor’s chair. It designates this message as a presentation of the essence of Jesus’ teaching.”*

The general thrust of this first discourse is about what it means to be one of his disciples or, to put it another way, what life is like in the kingdom of heaven. This is intimate teaching, aimed at shaping the disciples.

So what does Jesus say to his disciples in this sermon as whole?

The first part of the sermon, which we heard read this morning is referred to as the beatitudes.

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

and so on. Many of us, I am sure, could almost recite it word for word.

But look at the sermon. The second section paints a picture of the distinctiveness of Jesus’ disciples: distinctiveness that can, and will, make them at times, the object of persecution and rejection.

Jesus illustrates this with the two ideas of salt and light.

Take salt for a moment. It has two main functions - to flavour and to preserve. The rabbis of Jesus’ day used the idea of salt as a symbol for wisdom – if salt loses its saltiness it ‘becomes foolishness’. Think of the number of times when you are cooking or eating a meal that you reach for the salt pot. You do not use a great deal of salt, but it changes and enhances the flavour. No salt and something is definitely missing.

What Jesus is saying is that his disciples must be both distinct and at the same time immersed in the world around them. The disciples must function in society, as an alternative and challenging community. It is by their visible goodness that they will bring glory to the God and to Jesus whose disciples they are.

In so many ways the church needs, through its members, to be involved in the society, seeking to serve. We are not called to be separate but engaged with society, through being members of different community groups, foodbanks, street pastors, fund raisers and other organisations: being willing to service on bodies such as community councils and, in doing so, reflecting our faith into wider world – being the salt of the earth.

Or take the idea of light. A single small lamp gives just a little light. A well lit city on a hill-top, represents the corporate effect of the combined lights.

Go to the main cities in Canada and each has a “downtown” area - the commercial and business heart of the city. Land is plentiful so you would think these areas would spread over a large area but no, they go upwards - skyscrapers reaching towards the skies. The bigger the city the more

skyscrapers and the higher they are: a sign, a light, a statement; if you like, of the wealth and economic power of the place - a beacon to the surrounding area.

Jesus' disciples are called in the same sort of way to collectively, corporately represent Christ - to bring glory not to themselves but to God - to be the 'lights' of Christ.

The first point Jesus makes in this section of his sermon on the mount is that we are called to be distinctive but at the same time, touching and being part of the society of which we are part.

Jesus says "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."

Jesus then moves on in a different direction and now shows the way in which he has come not to replace or abolish the law and the prophets, what we would think of as the Old Testament but rather to fulfill them.

As another writer puts it *"To fulfil is to bring about that to which Scripture pointed, and that is what Jesus has now done. But the fulfilment of the law does not mean its abolition; it remains wholly authoritative and demands the fullest respect of the disciple."*

To understand Jesus' comment *"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"* you need to understand a little about the Hebrew language (and no I am not going to give a Hebrew lesson). In Hebrew there are no vowels. This makes things a little difficult when it comes to pronunciation so, instead, dots and dashes are placed under the letters and used in the same sort of way as vowels to help in reading out loud. Thus *"not one letter, not one stroke of a letter"* means the text in its entirety will not pass away. Jesus has come to fulfill the whole not to replace.

Having made it very clear that he has come to fulfill not abolish the law, Jesus then, in the remainder of the sermon encourages his disciples not to use the law as a set of lines which you see how close you can get to without actually crossing them, but rather as what should be in our hearts - in the way that we view and interact with the world and in what we pass on to others.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

To sum up, then, the Sermon on Mount is Jesus saying to his disciples and to us we need to have lives that are rooted and founded in him and reflect very clearly the values of the Kingdom of God. We are called to mirror Christ and in mirroring Christ, not to do it in secret - hidden away - but where it can be seen - not for our benefit but to bring glory to God, to draw others to Christ, to be the salt of the earth.

"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."

Let us pray.

God be in my head, and in my understanding;

God be in my eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;

God be in my heart, and in my thinking;

God be at my end, and at my departing.

Amen.