

Salt, Light and the Law

Have you ever sat in church, listening to a sermon, and found yourself thinking about who should be listening to it? “I wish my brother could hear this, it’s what he needs to hear”. Or “I wish Elsie could hear this, because she said ‘no’ when I asked her to swap with me on the roster, and this message is really telling her she should”. Or perhaps “I wish that minister I heard a few years ago could hear this, because he preached on it too, and he clearly got it wrong”. Or maybe even “I wish the prime minister could hear this, because I think his policy is wrong”.

Now, there’s a standard response when things like that are raised, and that’s to say “well, your brother’s not here,” or “Elsie’s not here,” or “that old minister’s not here,” or “the prime minister’s not here,” but you are. And then add “and how are you going to respond?”.

When we’re listening to a sermon, or when we’re reading the bible, we are the ones hearing it or reading it, and it is up to take it to heart and to respond. But I think that it might be good that part of our response might be to take it further, to share that message with my brother or with Elsie, maybe to think about why that old minister’s message was different to the one you just heard, or maybe to raise the issue with the prime minister – or perhaps more easily with a local member.

I hope though, that sharing that message is not simply sending those people a link to sermon on our website, because we need to put things in context. This message today is prepared in the context of St Ives Uniting Church for a Sunday morning service in 2023.

So while we, maybe, should be taking the message further, the message is primarily for you – or perhaps, in the context of St Ives Uniting Church in 2023, for us. It’s not just for you as individuals, but for us, me included, as the body of Christ in this place. It might be good and helpful to share a message with others, but we must take it into our own hearts and lives first.

Today’s gospel reading was from the most famous sermon of all time, and from the greatest preacher of all time. Someone who could really mean ‘you’ rather than ‘us’. As we heard last week, as we looked at the beatitudes, Jesus’ sermon on the mount was delivered on the mountainside to a mixed group – his closest followers, his disciples, and a whole crowd.

And I have no doubt that as that congregation was listening to Jesus speak those wonderful words, some of them were thinking things like “I wish my brother could hear this”, and “I wish Elsie could hear this”, and “I wish that pharisee from last week could hear this”, and “I wish Herod could hear this”.

But then Jesus gets to verse 13 “You are the salt of the earth.” There’s no room for doubt there. You are the salt of the earth. Not your brother, not Elsie, not the pharisee, not Herod. You.

You are the salt of the earth. All of you assembled on this mountainside. No matter what your circumstance, no matter what your age, no matter what your background. You. And

that continues through to us today. We are, Jesus says, the salt of the earth. Not someone else.

In preparing today's message I read a story about a minister who was talking about the salt of the earth and in the service asked a young boy what he knew about salt. The young boy responded "If you eat too much of it, you die".

And while that's true... salt is great stuff. Salt unlocks the flavour of food, it enhances savoury food, and even makes sweet things sweeter. But it's also a preservative, and an antiseptic. In ancient times it was sometimes used as a currency, a form of exchange. There's a common story that our word, "salary" comes from the Latin for salt because that's how Roman soldiers were paid – but that does seem to be a myth.

Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth, so it follows that the world needs to be salted. The world is a dark and fallen place that desperately needs to be changed - to be seasoned. As the salt, our task is to be part of making that change happen.

Of course, we could, as that small boy warned, overdo the salt, you can be too hard on people. No one likes to have salt rubbed into their wounds... so we shouldn't beat people with our bibles or shame them, instead we share the message of Jesus with compassion.

But... Jesus adds "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." Salt is sodium chloride, and sodium chloride can't be anything other than salt. Jesus isn't giving us a chemistry lesson – instead he's giving us a warning. If what we think is salt is no longer salty, then we should throw it away. Sometimes it's suggested that in ancient times, unscrupulous merchants would dilute salt with sand to make it go further...and over time it might be more sand than salt.

Not only are we the salt of the earth, but we are also the light of the world. Again, not my brother or Elsie or anyone but us. Those people on the mountainside, and all of us here today – we are the light of the world.

You might remember that in John's (8:12) gospel, Jesus is recorded as having said "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Each week when we gather for worship we light the Christ Candle to remind us of Jesus' light.

We often talk about dark times and dark places. Even if our own circumstances are not particularly bad we know of others who are living in those dark times and places.

But here Jesus says to us "You are the light" not that we should be the light or can be the light. We are the light and we must share that light with others.

"A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." (Matthew 5:14b-15)

Even in ancient times, towns were lit. The countryside was dark – as it is today, and while the towns wouldn't be as bright as modern towns – there would have been many sources of light. Lamps in houses, lanterns and torches carried from place to place. Fires. And when you were in the house, you raised your lamp up high on a lampstand to light the whole place.

Jesus says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16a)

It's interesting that Jesus doesn't say they may see how strong your faith is, or how holy you are or how often you pray or how well you know the scriptures. Instead, he says 'so that they may see your good deeds' – which is odd, because we know we are saved by faith, not good deeds or good works.

But we are saved for good works. It is by our Christian charity – our love for others – that we are to be known.

Practical examples of these good deeds are explored in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and indeed throughout the scriptures. I'm fond of that quote attributed to John Wesley "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

Our good deeds become a light – a beacon of hope – for the world. We show people that there is more to the world than darkness.

Jesus, having told us about ourselves, goes on to tell us about himself, by saying "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them".

Jesus' teaching was radical: he was preaching things that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had not preached – they were all about following the law, so the crowd would have wondered if Jesus was trying to introduce things that would be against the Jewish law.

The religious leaders of the time sought to help people follow the law by adding extra rules for people to follow. They thought the law needed clarifications and they were the ones to clarify and explain. But what that served to do was make life hard for the people. As Jesus said in Matthew 23:4 "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

Instead, Jesus said he came to fulfill the law and the prophets – those writings we know as the Old Testament – he was obedient to it, he fulfilled the prophecies contained in it and he came to fulfill the need to deal with our sin through his death on the cross.

Part of what Jesus goes on to do in the sermon on the mount is to explain the law. He tells the people "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" (5:21) Perfectly clear.... But he says there's more to living God's way than just not murdering "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to [the same] judgment." (5:22)

Jesus tells us that the law will be with us ‘until heaven and earth disappear’ and ‘everything is accomplished’. Although Jesus died for us, as the atoning sacrifice for us, that doesn’t mean the law is done away with. We still have an obligation to the moral law to keep God’s commandments – to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8)

Jesus makes it clear that it’s all important - there are no little or insignificant commands. The Pharisees made distinctions between light and heavy laws. In the modern context we tend to rank sins too – murder at the top, perhaps. Racism somewhere in the middle. Minor tax dodging and speeding at the bottom. In the church context, no other gods before Gods is mostly at the top, honouring your mother and your father perhaps somewhere in the middle and remembering the Sabbath Day and keeping it holy probably towards the bottom. But following Jesus, living God’s way, is a package – we can’t simply pick and choose what to obey and what not to. When Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20) he said “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...” “. Not just the things you think are important, but everything.

Jesus tells us “Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (5:19)

It seems the religious hierarchy of the time were a fairly self-important lot. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law regarded themselves as models of righteousness for others. But the ‘righteousness’ of the Pharisees was not established through faith or obedience – but by virtue of position and power.

Jesus says, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:20)

What they - Pharisees and the teachers of the law – do is not good enough. They are not living as God wants them to live. Despite what they say, they are not good examples – you should not be trying to be like them. We should not be like them.

If our righteousness is to surpass that of the Pharisees then it needs to be based in humility, recognizing that we cannot be declared righteous by what we do, or by our following the law as the Pharisees did, but by faith and obedience that comes from knowing Jesus. Loving Jesus. Following Jesus. And being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Amen