



Anglican Parish of St. Peter's Church,

Hackett's Cove, Nova Scotia

The Rev'd Taunya J. Dawson, MA, MDiv

Sermon Epiphany 5 (Matthew 5:15-30)

*They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.*

I

The Gospel we heard from Matthew today is a part of Christ's teachings known as "The Sermon on the Mount". He encourages his followers to be the, "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world".

The painting on today's bulletin is William Holman Hunt's famous "The Light of the World" – Christ, bearing that light, knocking at the door of our hearts, asking to be let in.

The Sermon on the Mount also includes the Beatitudes, which I'm sure many of you know. It is a recipe, if you will, for being the kind of Christian that will influence the world by being the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world". So how does Christ want us to be disciples? What does he mean when he calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

Christ is calling us to transform the world – to make it a better place. Salt preserves and enhances flavour, light radiates, warms, reveals and shows the way. Jesus used a perfect metaphor - having Salt and Light were as essential for survival in Biblical times as they are today.

Salt was a strong symbol for Christ's audience – not only was it vital to life, it also symbolized Israel's covenant with God. In Numbers 19:18 for example, God instructed the Israelites that every sacrifice, was to be seasoned with salt as a sign of the Covenant. It is symbolic of endurance, preservation, and freedom from corruption. To the ancient Hebrews, salt represented purification, and was also symbolic of enduring friendship, honesty, and loyalty (2Kin.2:19 -21; 2Chr.13:5).

Christ was instructing the people who gathered to hear him not to hide the light that he brings into the world. He tells them: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house". It is interesting that God says in 1 Kings (11:36) that, "David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name." Jesus is a descendant of the House of David. His light is indeed the light of the world, and the darkness hides it not.

We are to place our lamps where the light can shine, not hide it where it will not be a benefit to anyone. We are to have courage and take up the cross and be bold Christians.

II

Christ also strongly states that he has not come "to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill". (Matt 5:17) As Isaiah and other prophets predicted, the son of God would come to show us how to live righteously, which is what the Law was all about.

Christ makes it clear in our reading today that we must abide by the laws in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven. On the Mount, he offers guidance in how to live out our lives together as Christians. He has come to fulfill the law, which

Matthew (22) tells us is that “The Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” And, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” That remains what we are called on to do.

So what is Christ calling us to **be**? Earlier today, we heard what Isaiah prophesied that the righteous should do: “...loose the bonds of injustice... undo the thongs of the yoke, ...let the oppressed go free, and ...break every yoke ...share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, ...cover them....” Then, Isaiah tells us, “your light shall break forth like the dawn, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

Our Psalm today also describes, “those who fear the Lord and delight in his commandments” as “rising in the darkness as a light for the upright”. Because “they have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” Their light is indeed the light of the world, and the darkness hides it not.

III

Several years ago, Lisa Vaughn, our vitality coordinator, who was a leader at the fourth “More Bold” mission school session held at St. Nicholas’ several weeks ago, coined the term “salty Christians”. At “More Bold” participants shared their personal journeys, how to make our congregations a part of the broader community, and to build the Kingdom of God. We were sharing thoughts on how to be “salty Christians” - The salt of the earth is what nourishes the soil and brings forth the fruit. Salty Christians are those who are able to live **in** the world without

becoming **of** the world. They're able to interact with everyone in the community – rich or poor, without losing their distinctive Christian witness.

It's not easy; we are sometimes told that we live in a “post-Christian” era – it is so often tempting to go with the flow. It is easy to become a complacent Christian; the person who does not protect the truth of the Gospel in their life from a flood of other ideas. So our salt can end up being washed out, leaving the world flavourless. As Christians we cannot wash out Christ's teachings in the Gospels, or hide them from the world. We need to restore the salt and the light to our lives.

How can we do this? By turning from the influence of the secular world and turning, once more, to Christ. To repent, in other words – and to change and seek forgiveness, and to open our hearts to the lead of the Holy Spirit.

IV

During our Wednesday night Bible study we've been looking to the Saints as examples of how to live our Christian lives. We come to discover that sinning before becoming a Saint wasn't uncommon. Saint Paul, the former persecutor of Christians, is perhaps the best-known example!

None of us is perfect – and none of us needs to be. I read recently about a Lutheran minister, Nadia Bolz-Weber, who ministers to what she calls “saints and sinners” in the United States. She wears many tattoos and sports an edgy inner-city style – she fits in with those she ministers to on the street; and yet there she is, to transform their lives. She manages to take her Christianity into corners of life where the church can be pretty uncomfortable going. She is what St Paul might call “a servant to all, (so) that (she) might win the more.” (1 Corinthians 9:19)

She challenges herself and her congregation to welcome all “sorts and conditions” of people; to be disciples and to live the life of Christ together. She is truly an example of what it means to be a “salty Christian”.

In my first sermon, in this parish, I spoke about Paul’s disappointment with the group of Christians in Corinth, who are divided and are doing the opposite of what Christ wants us to do, which is to work together for the Kingdom. In Paul’s account, they have lost their saltiness – they have divided among each other when they should be going out and making disciples of others. Later on in Corinthians, Paul emphasizes how: “...we need to be God’s servants, working together.” We **are** the salt of the earth, but Paul tells us that it is, “God who gives the growth”. (1:Cor:3-9)

I am reminded of the words of Martin Luther King “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

Christ tells us that we are the salt of earth and the light of the world. And yet, without Christ, we are ashes and dust, not salt – and we live in darkness, not light. It is only through the grace of God, and the sacrifice of Christ that we can be those things that he wants us to be. But we also have to **want** to be those things; in the words of the Beatitudes, to “hunger and thirst after righteousness”.

The metaphor presented in today’s Gospel confirms the importance of Christ’s Church in doing his work, and bringing about the Kingdom of God. The “city built on a hill” cannot be hidden from the people of God; and our job, as “salty Christians” is to fill that city with light. Amen.