

Courage and Continuity

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Revd Rebecca Newland, 6th February 2011
Epiphany 5A Matthew 5.13-20

So today we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, that collection of Jesus teachings that has so inspired and challenged countless people throughout the centuries. When someone asked C.S Lewis if he cared for the Sermon on the Mount he made the point that he would have thought no one would 'care' for it. As he put it "*Who can like being knocked flat on his face by a sledge-hammer?*" He went on to say, "*I can hardly imagine a more deadly spiritual condition than that of the man who can read that passage with tranquil pleasure*".

I think this collection of Jesus teachings is meant to knock us flat and make us get serious about this business of following Jesus. If we get the implications of this sermon we are right to be wary and concerned, for Jesus makes it clear here and elsewhere that being his disciple would bring difficulties, suffering and persecution. You cannot begin to put into practise the values of God's Kingdom without ruffling a few feathers. Sometimes just being Christian is enough to get you into trouble.

We are all thinking of the Egyptian uprising at this time. Spare a thought for the Coptic Christians of that country who have been there since the first century. Just after Christmas one of their churches was attacked by a suicide bomber and 23 people died. They are leaving in droves and it is the same story all over the Middle East and indeed many parts of the world. Here in Australia our problems as a church are insignificant yet we are still careful of what others think of us, we are still wary of standing out too much. We Anglicans by and large like to keep our heads down and blend in.

I totally understand that. I have had some very uncomfortable moments when I have worn my clergy collar somewhere public and unexpected. Of course people look at the collar and are reacting either to past hurts by the church or misconceptions about faith and religion they have picked up in the media. I do understand their dilemma and of course I have had positive responses as well but I do not wear a collar lightly. Being a visible, obvious follower of Jesus, is not clear cut.

It seems then that one of the virtues required of we Jesus followers is courage. After Jesus has finished saying rejoice and be glad because blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you on my account, he then says: "You are the salt of the earth – do your job. You are the light of the world – shine brightly".

It seems that persecution and difficulty aside we are to have courage and be who we are by God's grace –salt and light. There is a very emphatic note to Jesus words – you, who are persecuted for my sake must function as salt and light.

In our English language when we say someone is the salt of the earth we tend to mean they are of great worth and reliability. But in the ancient Near East salt was a very precious commodity and in some cases was used to pay wages. In fact the root of our word salary comes from the word salt. Salt was so precious that Romans would sometimes tie a block of salt to those they executed, as a "gift" to appease any anger from the gods if it so happened

that the condemned person had been wrongfully accused. So apparently even the god's prized salt. To be that precious salt must have been rare or at least have taken some effort to obtain. Salt also change things. When you salt meat or vegetables or anything else they are changed.

Salt back then was also one of the most prized ingredients in cooking and added the much zest, that 'aha' moment of eating. So this phrase of Jesus did not refer to status – as in, you are the moral elite, as in very good. Instead it referred to function, as in “you must flavour and add zest to the whole world”. As a Christian I have never really thought of myself as an exciting cooking ingredient but that is the inference in this phrase. A precious, exciting cooking ingredient that changes reality.

At this point it is worth remembering that these sayings of Jesus about salt and light were not directed at individual Christians but to everyone sitting there listening. For Mathew they were directed at the Christian community he was trying to teach and encourage. And the message is there for us as well – we as a church are meant to be in this together. Being salt together for the whole earth, being people who live the teachings of Jesus – visible followers of Jesus who are peacemakers, merciful givers and justice fighters. However Jesus does paint a picture about what can happen to God's people under persecution and sustained opposition. Salt can lose its integrity, its identifying quality as salt. Just like of salt can leach away so it happens that faith can dry up and loose it's power. The Church can loose its edge, give up and adapt itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive calling is forgotten and it has rendered itself useless. It's salt has become tasteless and uninteresting.

In the same way that the church is to be salt for the whole world it is also to shine as a light. But the church needs to remember constantly that it is not the light itself but only the window through which light is to be seen. Like the Virgin Mary we are God-bearers, light bearers. Our biggest job is to keep the windows clean and uncluttered so that God's light can shine through us to the world around. In fact I suspect that if we spent more time on some decent housecleaning of ourselves and our Christian community then our mission in the world would be a lot easier!

My friends the way of Christ is mission: it is witnessing and benevolent intrusion into the life of the world. The way of Christ is to take the initiative and rather than hide from the world, let the light shine, in the hopeful trust that God's praise will be increased and not diminished by our fear.

The next words of Jesus in the collection of sayings seem to be completely unrelated to the beatitudes and the teaching on salt and light. You will notice they are about the importance of not breaking the Jewish religious law and the need to exceed the righteousness of the religious leaders of the time. I mean what does the law, the Jewish law, have to do with the beatitudes, witnessing and shining? Well I think Matthew had a reason for putting these passages together. It was not just some random edit.

If courage is what is needed as we witness to Jesus Christ in the world then what will help us is continuity with our tradition and our scriptures. Commentators take pains to point out that Jesus described himself as fulfilling the law, not keeping it. In fact we know he did not keep it because he went around working on the Sabbath, touching those considered ritually unclean and associating with sinners – at least that is what his opponents accused him of. Jesus mission then was to confirm the law and the prophets by interpreting scripture in terms of God's ultimate will. We could perhaps name that will as unconditional love. He fulfilled the scriptures and the eternal will of God by becoming the world's redeemer. However this passage does seem to have a very conservative view about the Holy texts of the Jews, the

books that contained their laws. But this should not be surprising as one of the defining characteristics of all Jewish groups at the time was a 'high' view of scripture.

The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, other sects and the Jesus movement all agreed that God was the ultimate author of scripture. What they disagreed vigorously about was how various passages should be interpreted and applied. This should sound very familiar!

This passage then is not about detail. It is not about how to follow the 613 mizvot – the Jewish religious and political laws. Jesus uses hyperbole, exaggeration to highlight respect for scripture. This respect for scripture is also not far removed from our experience since we too affirm the authority of scripture as a whole. Those of you who studied your Anglican catechism well and faithfully would know that number 6 of the 39 Articles of Religion that the Reformers so faithfully compiled gives primacy to scripture. It says: *Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation*”

It is important to note that not everything in scripture is necessary to salvation only that it has the critical bits in there! So if I start telling you that you need to pray 15 times a day, meditate under a gum tree and wear suits or dresses to be saved then you are quite right to have a conversation with our Bishop about my strange teachings for none of those things can be read in the bible or proved from it.

For me the point of this passage is to keep me grounded in the tradition and stories of the bible men and women and their chroniclers. To keep me grounded in the stories and writings of the prophets like Isaiah and Micah and the evangelists like Paul and Luke. We all need to be grounded in our faith and religion. Yes, there is great delight, joy and new knowledge to be discovered by seeking and searching outside of the Christian tradition. I know because I have done it but there is even more joy to be found by digging down deep into it. Its riches are unfathomable and abundant. When a Christian seeker asked the Dalai Lama whether she should become a Buddhist, his response was: 'No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply in your own tradition'. Or as Huston Smith put it: if you're looking for water, better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep' Staying grounded in our scriptural tradition also means that as we are out there being salt and light for the whole world we have the stories of those who first began to follow Jesus Christ but most importantly we have his story. The Son of God who became Jesus of Nazareth, God with us and light of the world and who leads us and everyone into eternal and abundant life. Praise and thanks to God. Amen