

Epiphany 5
5/2/2023

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-20

The visible and the secret

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (Mat 5.11)

The call in the Gospel to be salt and light picks up from this final blessing of the beatitudes. Each of the blessings of the beatitudes are not simply present gifts, but function also as future promises:

The poor are blessed *and* shall receive the kingdom of heaven

Those who mourn shall receive comfort

The hungry shall be filled

To the pure God will be visible

Running through the blessings from the beatitudes is not simply gift, but a sense of fullness that is arriving with Jesus himself; Jesus who offers this new way of life to those who follow the Anointed One. There is an eschatological dimension to the blessings which lead into today’s reading: that is, a dimension that is about God’s definitive intervention in the world to gather up all of history into a new order of righteousness and love. (Perhaps it’s worth noting that the Greek here translated as “blessing”, ‘*makarios*,’ can mean something like happy, fulfilled, and joyous, not merely “blessing.”)

It is in the context of this hope in hope itself, the context of hope in the fulfillment of hope, that we hear today’s Gospel reading.

Whatever we might say about the meaning and usage of salt in the ancient world (one commentary lists no less than eleven possible meanings for the metaphor of salt!), we are called to be the salt of the earth. There can be no limitations set on the scope of God’s redemptive work: it is the world, the whole world which God seeks to embrace in the saving work which Jesus’ teaching and ministry announces. So too does the reference to a light for the world, and a city on a hill recall us to the great expansive reach of God’s saving plans in Christ.

And yet here we begin to see one of the challenges with proclaiming with such confidence that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to and about the whole world. If this good news speaks to the world, then it speaks against that other Gospel: that Gospel of Rome, which spoke of military might and victory. Gospel was originally a term for military triumph; triumph which ultimately emanated from the city Cicero called, “a light to the world”: Rome.

Part of what ought to make the original audiences of this sermon nervous - whether those who heard Jesus' teaching during his ministry, or those who first heard these words recorded in the text of Matthew's Gospel - what ought to make them nervous is that the teaching of Jesus has direct political implications. It can be very difficult for us, in contemporary Australia, to understand what is at stake in what Jesus seems to be teaching.

If Jesus really is the Messiah, who brings fulfillment of the prophetic utterances of Jewish hope;

if Jesus really is proclaiming the definitive intervention of God, to gather up history and fundamentally change the world as it was known;

if Jesus really is suggesting that the whole world is the domain of Christian discipleship; then Jesus is consigning his followers to direct confrontation with Roman authorities.

Jesus is signing the warrant of oppression for the communities that will be formed in his name. He not only looks forward to his own death upon a cross, but the deaths of hundreds, thousands, of Christians under the Roman persecution - and the various persecutions throughout history, and which continue today.

It's here that some assumptions about the dynamics of power and authority in Jesus' historical context need some revision. It has become almost cliché to talk about the Pharisees and Sadducees as the religious authorities wielding power to ultimately send Jesus to his death. Across history Christians have perpetuated the idea that the legalistic Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes misunderstood God's gracious love, and instead contorted the law to maintain their place of power in ancient Judea.

Now, while it was true that Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes held positions of relative power within the Jewish communities of the ancient Roman empire, it should always be remembered that they were leaders within an otherwise oppressed community, within an occupied territory. In other words, while the religious leaders of Jesus' day did indeed have power and influence, much of this power and influence existed within a broader context of disempowerment for the Jewish people as a whole.

This broader understanding of the power dynamics of the ancient Jewish community ought to give us pause when we move too quickly to condemn the religious leaders of Jesus' day for their lack of understanding or faithfulness. In our Gospel reading today the righteousness of these religious leaders even becomes the standard for measuring the righteousness of Jesus' own followers. Perhaps the point Jesus is making is that for all the disagreements Jesus has with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, they are the ones who are the visible manifestation of the Jewish community. They are the ones who must negotiate the complex relationship with capricious Roman officials; they are the ones who have sought to keep a dispirited, dispossessed people faithful to God's law.

Now this, of course, does not mean that the religious leaders are free from culpability: the Sadducees had a reputation for cooperation with the Romans, not all of which was for the benefit of the Jewish people as a whole; and all of the Gospels record quite heated disputes between Jesus and Pharisees.

Nonetheless, what Jesus seems to be aware of in his teaching is not only a new kind of religious ethos for a self-contained community. Jesus seems to be aware that his teaching implies a direct confrontation with the ways of the world. Not simply because his religious ethic is unpopular, but because he is the Messiah who fulfills the expectations of Jewish hope and brings the arrival of God's Kingdom. While understood in different ways, this was the same hope held by the religious leaders, who sought to see this fulfillment of hope through engaging the messy, complex world of leading an occupied people.

For this reason it needs to be made abundantly clear, then, that what Jesus offers us in his own proclamation is not a repudiation of the law, not an impudent rejection of the religious leaders and their complex negotiations with Roman power. Rather, Jesus offers us in his proclamation the gathering up of Jewish hope, and a new way forward.

Jesus is saying:

Nothing will pass from the law, indeed that same God who the law draws us to is now calling us through and beyond this law. That same God is calling us to see that law fulfilled. That same God is offering us both gift and fulfillment. That same God is meeting us in the complex, risky world in which we stake our lives on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

For us today, 2000 years removed from unjust occupation in Judea, this can seem somewhat alien (though, of course, perhaps it shouldn't, with the ongoing plight and violence in modern Palestine). We, in this room, are unlikely to be called upon to stake our lives on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. And yet, we are still recipients of this same call; still part of this same secret thread which weaves its way through the whole world and all of human history.

Our call is no less cosmic in scale: *we* are called to gather up the history of hope for the world and carry it forward. We may no longer do this in ways which seem as visible as the past, and yet we should not therefore diminish the scope of God's redemptive work. The world *is* the domain of God's salvation.

What we continue to learn as we move out into the world is that this redemptive work is not always something we carry with us. We often find the Spirit out there ahead of us. We are often called into the messy, complex work of negotiating the different forces which shape the Church and its relation to the world - sometimes needing to take a backseat to how others teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven. In this too we are to be lights that shine on the secret ways God's will is working out in the world.

The call today is to be salt and light. This is a call which gathers up the hope of the oppressed, which carries the cry for justice into the whole world. The call to be salt and light is the call to highlight where the world needs promise, and where the world experiences fulfillment - even in small and secret ways.

And in all things we proclaim with confidence that the world needs the God who has been faithful since the beginning, and is faithful still.
