

‘LIGHT AND SALT’ –
CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

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‘You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world’ - these two statements of Jesus (Matt 5:13-16) are quoted often in discussions on Christian responsibility and influence in society. The images are simple and we are so familiar with ‘light’ and ‘salt’ that it is easy to overlook their biblical setting and so miss their richness, challenge and basis for hope.

When these words are looked at in their context in the Gospel of Matthew what clues are given as to ways forward for Christian participation in Australian society in the early 21st century?

Putting light into context

The immediate setting brings to the fore two important features:

- They are the first words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew, following the announcement of the reversal of blessings, and so are highlighted.
- They are followed by statements on ‘righteousness’ (5:17-20) and then various specific instances of expected behaviour.

The metaphor of salt has no specific religious connotation, with no Old Testament or Jewish precedents and the few NT uses referring simply to ‘saltiness/seasoning’. The use of salt in the society of that day is so diverse many symbolic applications can be made, although the main ones are preserving and seasoning.

‘Light’ however has a rich background. The association of ‘a city on a hill’ points to prophetic images of Jerusalem, based on Isaiah 2:1-4; 60:1-21, supported by other Jewish writings where God’s people or the temple are light. The Isaiah context, as elsewhere, is of a city which is meant to be one of ‘righteousness’, a place where people worship God alone and do what is right and just so that there is harmony and blessing shared by all. It is a place from which ‘teaching’ is then heard and followed, because it is linked with lifestyle. It attracts ‘the nations’ who freely share in the blessings. Sadly that was not what the ‘city’ was like, but God is to act, bringing transformation, putting things right.

Is it any wonder then that when Jesus speaks of being ‘light of the world’ he refers to ‘beautiful works’ and goes on to speak of ‘righteousness’. Interestingly Matthew uses ‘works’ only three other times, twice to refer to the ‘works’ of the Pharisees (22:3, 5) and once of the ‘works’ of Jesus: ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them’ (11:2-5; v 2 is literally ‘John heard of the *works* of Christ’).

This also provides a clue to why the Beatitudes come first. They describe people who yearn for the future kingdom where all will be put right, linked with an anticipatory lifestyle that leads to

opposition. And opposition and light go together! The final beatitude (5:11-12), repeating the idea of the eighth, shifts from the impersonal 'they' to the direct 'you', which is continued in 'you are the salt of the earth... the light of the world'. The 'you' who are light are those who share the values of the beatitudes, but the 'light-shining' lifestyle of the kingdom is not always welcome: 'light' exposes and 'salt' can sting!

The Lord's Prayer is the centre of the sermon of the mount (6:9-13) and takes up words at the beginning and end of the sermon – 'kingdom of heaven', 'Father in heaven', 'will of my Father' (5:3,10,16; 7:21). People who pray the Lord's Prayer are those who 'hear these words of mine and act on them' (7:24, 26, after all the words of the sermon).

Desire for the coming kingdom and giving glory to 'our Father in heaven' means seeking to do the ways of the kingdom now, made explicit in the words of Jesus, and in this way being 'light of the world and salt of the earth'.

Light in a real world

That this is to be lived out in the real world is seen in a number of ways in Matthew. In chapters 1-4 the first and last Old Testament citations are from Isaiah 7-9 (7:14 and 8:23 – 9:1, in Matt 1:23 and 4:15-16). The Isaiah context is the Assyrian threat in the time of Ahaz, with its fear and insecurity, Matthew's context is in the time of Roman rule, with the puppet Herod who is threatened by the birth of Jesus. To people in Galilee ('Zebulun and Naphtali') Jesus comes as 'light' announcing and demonstrating that 'the kingdom of heaven is near' - and then says to his disciples 'you are the light'. And that was in a context of the arrest of John the Baptist (4:12). It is no coincidence that to an imprisoned John, wondering if Jesus really was the promised One, Jesus responds by doing the 'works' of the coming kingdom. Jesus comes as 'light' to a world where people are sick, in pain, demon-possessed and poor.

After a death where Roman and Jewish powers and politicking seemed to have the upper hand, the Gospel ends with the resurrected Christ announcing that 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'. There is no restriction to personal and family life! And his final command in Matthew is: 'make disciples... teaching them to obey all I have commanded you' (which includes the sermon on the mount). It is a command that is obeyed with joyful hope with the assurance of Christ's presence 'until the end of the age'.

Responses to Christ's words – becoming like Christ

There has been much debate through the centuries as to how the Church and individual believers are to respond to the Sermon on the Mount. In the early centuries new believers were taught how to follow the lifestyle of the Gospels, but this was considerably weakened after the time of Constantine when the Church began to 'adjust' to the ways and values of secular rule. Since then various approaches have been taken – although it could be said that for many the practical application has been that it is 'impractical' and does not work in the 'real world'.

For some evangelicals the false dichotomy between 'faith' and 'works' has led to a similar downplaying. In obeying 'make disciples' there is rightly action in evangelism and cross-cultural mission, but the 'teaching' has often focussed on 'belief' and actions in limited areas rather than 'obeying all'. The 'kingdom of God' has been seen as something for the future, rather than a reality whose values are to be lived now. Actions flow from belief – or is it rather, actions show what we actually believe? If one is to believe 'the Gospel' (and all 28 chapters of Matthew are 'the Gospel'), believing that Jesus has (and not simply will have) all authority, that he is with us always, and that the time is coming when all will recognise his rule, then one cannot avoid grappling with the issues

of how to live the values and lifestyle of God's Rule now. Part of the Good News is that we are set free from the values that are doomed to fail and are enabled to live the life of the coming Kingdom of God.

Grappling is an appropriate word! We live in a complex world (but so to was first century Palestine), and all believers are on a journey. To use Paul's words, 'we *are being transformed* into the likeness of the Lord with ever-increasing glory' (2 Cor 5:18). In the present life we will imperfectly follow Christ, but the *direction* of change is towards Christ-likeness. This provides a helpful criterion to apply in complex decision-making: *which action is in the direction of Christ-likeness?* We will not always agree in a given instance: transformation means we are each at different stages, seeing some things clearly and others not at all. But we are in this together with shared values: the phrase is 'you (plural) are the light (singular)'. The sermon becomes 'practical' as we help one another to grapple with living kingdom values in a society that does not recognise Christ's authority. We are 'light and salt'.

The Values of the Kingdom and Life in Society

Christians in the early centuries lived a lifestyle that was set free from the values and attitudes that bound many Romans, 'fear of the occult, quest for status, quest for material security, and fear of foreigners'. Naturally decisions by rulers and others in authority related to those values! Some kingdom values may be identified in the sermon on the mount, the context which elaborates on 'beautiful works':

- Humility that comes from knowing our own weakness and failures with a joy that comes from being forgiven
- Concern for what is right and merciful and pure
- Active peace making, seeking for reconciliation (and not a passive 'peace-loving' quest for security)
- Goodness that is 'beautiful' (sadly some goodness can seem cold and unloving)
- Awareness of the pernicious results of anger and of the harbouring of grudges
- Respect of the personhood of the opposite sex and of the integrity of marriage: for men, women are not to be treated as objects.
- Importance of truth and integrity in public utterances
- Love of enemies (Mel Gibson's film *The Passion Christ* highlighted this in Jesus' words and actions: while the film was violent, it was the first film from Hollywood in which 'bad' violence was not defeated by 'good' violence)
- Doing good without wondering 'what benefit or kudos will I get in return' (how many political decisions and giving of aid relate to benefits in return?)
- Recognition of the seductive power of Mammon (why does Jesus say more about money and status than about prayer and sexuality?)
- Dependence on a generous Father, free from worry about security
- Hope that transcends appearances: the prayer 'your kingdom come' will be answered

What will these mean in political debate? Politics is how a *polis* (city state) works as a unit, with all the competing demands and interests of its citizens. Christians are to take part as citizens - as Christian citizens. We have responsibility to live and speak the values of the Kingdom. The way of Christ is:

- not the Constantinian model of imposition (which sadly the Church has used and some Christians still desire)

- not the model of withdrawal, since light is to shine in darkness and salt is to be spread around.
- but a pattern of incarnation, a model of participation, living different values with sacrificial service despite opposition, being like Christ.

The city of Jerusalem was to be a 'light to the nations', joyfully sharing blessings with open doors. Human 'cities/states' tend to be like Babel, building walls to safeguard prosperity and security of people 'like us'. In contrast, Jesus speaks of 'salt of *the earth* ... light of the *world*'. As citizens we seek the well-being of the city – the nation as a whole – but in a way that actively shares blessings and prosperity with the world. We promote actions that share.

At times Christian action will be like salt, helping to preserve what is good in society or making life more pleasant and enjoyable. At other times it will be like light, exposing injustice and untruth and sectional interests, setting free from various forms of bondage and injustice, drawing attention to forgotten people, pointing to a better way, showing how it is possible to be peacemakers and to do justice and be concerned for the wider world for their benefit, pointing to new life in Christ.

Central is prayer – 'Father in heaven, Your kingdom come'. Go through the items and tease out their relevance for praying for our nation. Pray for wisdom and strength to 'do your will on earth as it is in heaven'. Living out the faith that Christ alone has all authority and that he intends his words to be followed is being 'salt and light', bringing glory to our Father in heaven.