

## 5 February 2022; Matthew 5:12-20; 5 Epiphany; Pastor Fraser Pearce

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, in the presence of the crowds,  
And he says, **'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.**

Now this is coming right after the Beatitudes,  
Those statements of blessing that Jesus spoke to his disciples  
As he began his great Sermon on the Mount.  
So as we get into today's text, it's good to keep the context in mind.

Jesus starts by calling his disciples the salt of the earth,  
And you've probably heard before that the Jesus means something like  
That the faithful disciples act as a kind of salt-like preservative  
In the world, or that they give the world a kind of savour.  
I think that's right, and notice here Jesus that Jesus has in mind  
The *purpose* of salt: it's not kept in homes for ornamental reasons,  
If it somehow loses it's saltiness, it's preservative and savouring power,  
Then it is of no use to anyone.

So, we could say that Jesus is getting us to think about  
*Why* we have been called as disciples,  
About what *the purpose* of the life of faith is.  
In brief, we could say that God gives us faith to grow us in love,  
But let's listen to how he goes on:  
**'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. 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.**

A city is built on a hill as a safe refuge,  
And as a sign of strength, so it is not hidden but on full display.  
Likewise, a lamp is lit for a *purpose*: to give light to the house.  
Listen to Jesus to how goes on: **In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**

Here we come to a bit of an issue,  
Because in the very next chapter of Matthew,  
In the same sermon that Jesus is giving, we hear these words: **'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.**

**'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**

We'll hear these words as a congregation soon,  
As they are read out at each year's Ash Wednesday's service.

So which is it, and we meant to let our light shine  
So that others may see our good works,  
Or are we meant to be aware of practicing our piety before others,  
So that we won't be seen by them?

Here's a way of thinking about it that I find helpful:

I'm married to Margaret,  
And I think it's a good thing that everyone knows it.  
I wear a wedding ring, and I want all to see in my words and actions  
That, by God's grace, I love and cherish my wife.  
Imagine I tried to hide the reality of my marriage,  
Or that I treated Margaret poorly in my words and actions,  
Wouldn't that suggest there is something very wrong in my marriage?  
On the other hand, let's say I spoke publicly very lovingly to Margaret,  
And I even bought her gifts and did acts of love for her,  
*But only when others were watching,*  
But that when we were alone I never spoke to her  
And acted as if she didn't exist.  
Imagine that my devotion to my wife *was only for show:*  
Wouldn't that also suggest something is very wrong with the marriage?

Well Jesus says in chapter 6 that things like devotional  
Almsgiving, fasting, and prayer,  
That these things, when done in personal devotion to God,  
Should be done privately.  
But our *good works*, these should be done openly.

OK. What sort of good works could Jesus be talking about?  
Well, he has just spoken the Beatitudes, we heard them last week,  
So let's pick up on a couple of those:

Jesus said, **'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**  
Most of us have times in the family, at the workplace, among friends,  
And in the church where there is conflict,  
Even bitter conflict that builds into hatred and division.  
Well, as we trust that God shares his peace with us,

That in Christ Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins,  
God frees us to be agents of peace  
To people who may not deserve peace any more than we do.  
Aiming at real peace - that does not bury the truth,  
Or ignore the need for what is just -  
Aiming at bringing about reconciliation between those in conflict,  
This is a good work that we do well to let shine in the world.

Or think about the beatitude: **'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.'**

We have received mercy, help in our need, from God.  
There are many people in real need in the world,  
Even people close to us, whose real need might be  
For something as simple as a word of encouragement.  
God gives us faith, he leads us to trust,  
That we have help from him in our need,  
He gives us faith to free us to be people who can help others  
With the very gifts that God has first given us.

Because the law is fulfilled in this sort of God-glorifying love,  
Jesus can then say: **'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.'**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes on to give examples  
Of the very sort of thing that he is talking about here.

So listen to what he says later in the sermon: **'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire.'**

To keep the commandment 'Do not murder'  
Does not mean simply refraining from unlawfully killing someone.  
Jesus reveals what is going on in the heart,  
So that even asserting that our fellow Christians  
Do not truly believe in God, but that they are fools  
Who say in their hearts that there is no God,  
So that even calling them 'fool' puts us in danger of the hell of fire.

As it happens, Luther understood what Jesus is talking about well.  
Have you noticed that in the Small Catechism,  
When he unpacks the 10 commandments,  
He does not only say what we shouldn't do,  
But what we should: what love fulfilling the law would look like.  
So, with the Fifth Commandment, Do not murder,  
Luther writes this: ***We should honour and love God, and so we should not do anything to hurt or injure other people. Instead we should give them help whenever they need it.***  
That's one way to get at the spirit of Jesus' teaching today.

Jesus ends today's reading with these words: **Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

So: Jesus upholds the Scriptures, not letting them go,  
But teaching us that they are to be fulfilled in love,  
And more than that, fulfilling them himself  
In *his perfect life of love.*

In his suffering, death, and resurrection for our sake.  
As long as we think that the law is a vehicle for us to show  
How serious we are in our life with God,  
Then we will quickly fall into despair,  
Or into the kind of for-show spirituality that Jesus is warning against  
When he says that our righteousness must exceed that  
Of the scribes and Pharisees.

But as we receive the law as Jesus' disciples,  
As people who have been baptised into him,  
And have had our sins forgiven,  
As we receive and hold on to his commandments,  
As people who by the Holy Spirit call out on God as Father  
Just as Jesus does,  
God frees us to be people who do good works,  
Who are peacemakers, who show mercy.

May God keep us in this true faith,  
So that people may see our good works  
And glorify the Father in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.