

Sermon for the fourth Sunday before Lent.

Introduction

I don't mind saying that I have been struggling with this gospel passage a little over the last few days. I suppose that it is because it brings two teachings of Our Lord together next to each other that do not really seem to sit too well together. First of all there is the double saying:

You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world.

Those two phrases seem straight forward, that's not to say that there isn't a lot that we can learn from them or that there is not great depth in them but there is quite a contrast with the second theme of the passage.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Perhaps we should be brave and take on the difficult part of the passage first.

Behaviour not hats.

I am sure that you will have picked up by now that the Christian faith is not much given to rule making; that makes us a bit distinctive among the world's religions – Christians are not to be identified by their dress or what they eat, indeed there is a strong tradition in Scripture that these things are the least that we should be concerned about. Remember those words of Our Lord: 'this is how people will know you are my disciples, when you love one another'. Christians are to be known by their behaviour and not by their hats. There have indeed been Christian communities, at times, that have identified themselves by their hats but that is not mainstream Christian behaviour. In the Dutch islands, for instance, distinctive dress was part of social expression. If you could go back to the market in Middleburg in the nineteenth century, for instance, you would have been able to look around and tell at a glance which women were married and which were single, which religious community they belonged to (Catholic or Protestant) and which village they were from – just from their headdress. Quite helpful if you were a lad hoping to meet a nice, suitable girl. But it would not tell you anything about her behaviour or demeanour – it would not tell you if she was a faithful Christian, for instance. So when Jesus said that there are two commandments, love God and love your neighbour, he was setting a tone for his people: all the law and the prophets, he said, amount to those six words: Love God and Love Your Neighbour. Similarly, when he wanted to describe the judgement of humanity, Jesus described the Almighty as asking how we had treated one another, 'have you fed the hungry, clothed the naked, brought good news to the poor?' All these scriptures are from Matthew's gospel and that is an important idea to remind ourselves about because Matthew was writing for Christians who had first been Jewish – rather than gentile – he was wanting to reassure them that their old Jewish practices were not wrong, they had not been disobedient to God, but Jesus of Nazareth was calling them on – into something new.

The Law and the prophets.

That being the case, how are we to understand Jesus' saying that he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets – does that mean that all those other commandments were to be seen as still in force? Jewish tradition is that there are 613 of them – 248 positive instructions and 365 prohibitions. What was Jesus saying about all those Mitzvot, those commandments? This is one of those times when it would be really helpful to know exactly what the Lord said and in which language but we don't: we have to make a judgement. Jesus, as Matthew describes him, seems to sit quite lightly to those mitzvot, but at the same time he is really interested in how we treat one

another. Now it might be that in this passage, where Jesus uses the phrase the **Law and the Prophets**, he was not meaning the code of Mitzvot but using the phrase simply to mean 'the Scriptures'. Perhaps it is legitimate for us to read Jesus' words as, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Scriptures'. I think that reading it that way would fit in with the rest of what he said and would still maintain the principles of his teaching. Why does any of this matter? Why should you still be awake? I am suggesting that what Jesus wanted from his disciples then and what he still wants from us now is an attitude to life.

- An attitude to life that is self-giving instead of selfish.
- An attitude to life that honours the needs of others.
- An attitude to life that brings us to behaviour that is fitting for the Kingdom of God.

Why so? Because he expects us to be good in our ways and in our being, remember the phrase:

Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Let your light shine out

So if you and I are to be more righteous than these other people how are we to do that and what will be the evidence? That, I suppose is where we return to the beginning of the passage: **Let your light shine before people that they see your good works**. We are all called to conversion of life, we cannot say we are Christians and not have lives that are changed. Those good works are the evidence of that change to our inner lives and under the influence of the Holy Spirit the good works become our normal practice, really good habits for us to have: habits of prayer, reading Scripture, of acts of generosity and service. We can from those two particular phrases though that God has an ambition for our society though to be changed for the better by the lives of the faithful. Light drives away darkness and we are to be the bringers of light in our time and place, not little glimmering flames but big lights, like bonfires on a hill-top. Similarly we are to be like salt that changes the taste of all the food it touches. Just as I said earlier – we have to have an attitude of self-giving and from these verses we can see that God's intention for his people is that they should make the world to be a better place. We are not called to hide in our congregations but rather to be an influence for good in the world.

Conclusion

So here we are, gathered about the Lord's Table; we have named and repented of the failings in our lives, we shall be forgiven and fed in the Eucharist. I hope that we will enjoy what we do together as a congregation but we have to remember that however much we may feel better for what we have done, we are not simply doing it for ourselves. The Eucharist is offered for the sake of the world, not just for the sake of this congregation, it should lead us up into a new state of mind in which we are all the more determined to be part of God's saving mission to the world – we are changed by our worship, not for our own sakes but so that we can be agents of change in this poor suffering world that needs to hear the words of salvation that Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke to it.

You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world.