

We are to be a lamp in the darkness

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Epiphany + 5a – Mt 5 13-20

Jesus said: *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* ^{Mt 5.16} That's an amazing charge; and amazing sentence; the goodness of God; the light of Christ – people are meant to see it through you and me. Or even more daunting, how we live is supposed to affect people so profoundly that they'll see God in our lives and seek God for themselves.

So what is it we're meant to do that will have this extraordinary effect on people? Are they meant to see us heading off here each week and then want to experience God for themselves just because they see us do that? Are they meant to come to church with us and see us praying and singing – and because of that, will they suddenly have an experience of God that makes them break forth in praise? Would that constitute the sort of life-changing experience that makes people burst out in praise of God. Well sometimes, yes. But isn't it normally a more blinding light – an overwhelming, transforming realisation; some sort of Epiphany? What is that light? How do people experience it? In this season of Epiphany, the central symbol is light – light shining in the darkness which:-

Light which drives away fear and replaces it with peace;

Light which drives away ignorance and replaces it with understanding and tolerance;

Light which drives away deception and replaces it with truth;

Light which drives away despair and replaces it with hope;

Light which exposes bad motives, revealing their selfishness and injustice, and enabling equity and justice to flourish.

When light makes peace drive away fear, when light makes hope drive away despair, when light makes justice drive away oppression, then kindness drives away isolation and people rejoice; people feel gratitude; people their own selves are being given back – their dignity and their worth. And those feelings and re-births give glory to the God who inspires and enables all such blessings. But how are you and I meant to be involved in all that?

I think that today and last week, the first part of the Sermon on the Mount tells us how we are to be involved in all that in a very surprising way.

Last week, we heard the beatitudes. Jesus declared blessed those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those who are reviled, persecuted, and falsely maligned on account of Jesus. He declares all of them blessed – which means they're as much a source of blessing as people receiving blessing.

For Jesus, such people are true disciples. Somehow our weaknesses and our desire for peace and goodness enables the Kingdom light to shine through us. It's harder still to imagine that some of these conditions are really things Jesus treasures in us; that he sees our weaknesses are his opportunities to shine through us. Harder still to imagine them as qualities that mean we shine with God's light. How can we believe we are blessed if we feel unworthy, grief-stricken, sinful or persecuted and misrepresented? That's what's so surprising about this first part of the Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus is saying it's true; that's how we shine.

This year, I'm reading a commentator – Craig Keener – who

believes that Jesus means exactly what he says. He hears Jesus telling us today that if we have these feelings – feelings that, as Elizabeth said last week, no society actually values or respects or counts as important – if we have these feelings and don't hide them from others, Keener reckons that Jesus says that can make us Kingdom salt and light. Which means that we can effectively communicate to the world that the Kingdom is available to anyone. Even, and especially to people who feel unworthy, grief-stricken, sinful or persecuted or misrepresented! I think Keener is right, and that's a wonderful gift we bear. Our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities are our gifts.

If we're able to be open to ourselves and others about where we are vulnerable, and about our hopes for better things, then we're authentic; we are real; we're not hiding behind any sort of mask. And being open to this vulnerability in ourselves opens us to our need for God's strength and love, and it opens us to being compassionate towards – well everyone – because we're all in the same boat.

As an aside, this helps me come to terms with the frightening words that our Gospel finished with today about the Law and our righteousness – that our righteousness has to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees; how?! Who can obey the 613 laws?

Later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus declares that love of God and neighbour is what keeps the Law. ^{Matt 22.34-40} The Law and the Prophets hang from our love of God and neighbour. When we open up to our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities, and know we're safe in Jesus' arms, and so become able to risk the vulnerabilities named in the Beatitudes, we can love God and neighbour; we can be salt and light, because we can recognise we're in this together. We can be compassionate. And that's a wonderful wellspring of love.

We are the ones who have the awesome privilege of being named the carriers of Christ's love. I've always thought Jesus is

the light of the world, but here he is telling us that it's we who are that light too. We are to be a lamp in the darkness – a lit-up city on a hill – an approachable beacon of peace, hope, justice, trust, love. So, during the season of Epiphany, our focus is on the way we embody that baby boy – and everything we saw him become – in a world that is desperately in need of all the qualities that his light can offer. I find that a staggering privilege, and a daunting, inspiring trust. We don't have to be anyone else but ourselves. Thanks be to God! Amen