

# Make a difference for those in need

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Epiphany + 5 – Isa 58 6-12 – Ps 112 – 1 Cor 2 1-6 – Mt 5 13-20

Last Sunday, we heard the beginning of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount – the *Beatitudes* – where Jesus said certain types of people were blessed. Beatitude means a state of contentment; happiness or blessedness. So it was surprising what type of people Jesus named; poor, grieving, meek, hungry people; people longing for something better; persecuted people. They'd hardly count themselves blessed, but Jesus says they are. And he promises the fulfilment of all their needs. These blessed ones are the local people gathered around him; people battling to make a living in a cruel world of military occupation, and in a religious environment where many in positions of leadership had sold out, serving only their own self-interest.

Today, Jesus goes further and says that these normal, local people are God's salt and light; the ones to transform the earth. They're the ones Jesus calls to join with him in bringing about the promises of the *beatitudes*: for the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven – for the sad, relief – for the dispossessed, an inheritance – for the starving, full bellies – for the compassionate, mercy – for the faithful, a true meeting with God – for the peacemakers, the peace of belonging – and for the displaced and deported, citizenship forever in the kingdom of heaven.

Ordinary, local people. And he meant it. Just before the Sermon on the Mount, we see Jesus choose his disciples. He picks ordinary, local people who know what it is to struggle for a living. He picks the poor in spirit, people who know the pain and struggle it can be simply to put a meal on the table

– people who can't do anything but put their trust in God.

Jesus calls *these* people to work with him to change things for the good. They're the people who really know what's needed, and who know we need God's help to get there. Among these ordinary people, Jesus finds the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But more, Jesus *becomes* one of the poor, the sad, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers; people who've known persecution and bullying – people who know we need God. Jesus became one of us!

All this is wonderfully positive. But there's also an edge to what Jesus says. Salt that loses its flavour is out. A lamp under a bushel basket is absurd. And anyone who thinks the Law and the Prophets go out the window is kidding themselves.

I think he's talking to a different lot of people in the crowd with these words; not the ordinary locals, but the religious and political leaders who are always lurking in the wings wherever Jesus is teaching or helping people.

Jesus's immediate audience was Israel, and Israel's immediate context was its military occupation by Rome. Whenever Jesus taught about the law and the prophets, he did so in the context of a heated debate about the political and religious course Israel should be steering, given the context of Roman occupation. Edwin van Driel describes three main positions that people took. (FotW Yr A Vol 1 p. 337)

1<sup>st</sup> The priestly caste based in the Temple – the Sadducees – followed a pragmatic course of action: collaboration to ensure survival. 2<sup>nd</sup> At the other end of the spectrum were zealots who wanted to take up arms and fight the Romans. Many Pharisees belonged to this faction. 3<sup>rd</sup> But some Pharisees chose what van Driel calls 'the Ghetto option'; deep private study and practice of Jewish Law. They kept the 613 precepts and studied

righteous Jewish living and doctrine. They did this to preserve Jewish cultural and religious identity while Israel waited for God to send his anointed and clear the invaders out. *And that practice would later turn out to be an invaluable service that the Pharisees gave their people after the Temple was destroyed and Jewish identity faced utter oblivion.*

But for Jesus, living a faithful life in hiding was anathema. He saw things like we just saw Isaiah see them. If you go through all the motions, but stop at the point where it might make a difference for the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless and the naked poor, you're just serving your own interests; you're part of the problem. To a people divided and confused by such anxious questions and varied answers, Jesus preached his sermon. It was a sermon to 'challenge to Israel to be Israel.' N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 288. And that's what it means what he called people to a practical righteousness that *exceeded that of the Pharisees*. The Law had to make a difference for those in need. If it didn't, practising religion was just salt that had lost its flavour; light hidden under a bushel – a pointless caricature of itself.

So what does that mean for us? We're carrying on as a parish where a constant concern is whether we'll survive or not too. And that makes us cautious about our financial resources. It makes us cautious in our public statements about justice for oppressed and needy people. So today I hear Jesus taking us to task in his words to us and anyone else who goes for the Ghetto option. Scripture tells us a tenth of all we make each year should go to the poor and needy; the oppressed, the homeless, the hungry and naked. As Isaiah says, they are our kin, and we shouldn't hide from them. We're drafting a budget for the coming year. Today Isaiah and Jesus charge this parish to name charities and causes we will support, and at our Vestry meeting on March 22, decide the ones we'll give a tenth

of our projected income in the coming year. Before anything else; salt and light are our witness. Amen