

# Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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## Introduction

Matthew's gospel is, above all, the gospel of faith and ethics, of good news and morality – dominated by the Sermon on the Mount, its subtext the constant need for disciples to BE good news. This is summed up in both the conclusion of the Sermon “Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” and, finally, in the conclusion to the whole gospel “Go make disciples of all nations....teaching them to observe everything that I commanded you”.

In other words, though Matthew offers something far more than simply a compendium of the teaching of Jesus on living a holy life, his over-riding concern is that all his hearers should “walk the talk”, their faith in Christ should be reflected in daily obedience to the way of life he modelled and proclaimed. For him it would be unthinkable that those bearing the name of Christian should ever be other than up to their elbows in the work of the gospel, which must be evident in all that they do and all that they are. This means that the challenge of living reconciliation is very much part of the landscape as the gospel unfolds.

With passages that are so familiar, it's all too easy to just glide on through, to treat the words as just another slice of apple pie, to which nobody could possibly take exception. However, in throwing down the gauntlet to challenge his disciples, Jesus challenges us too – and where there is challenge there can so often be conflict...The very act of identifying “you” – those listening – means that there are others who are neither listening nor salt, light nor sign of the Kingdom – and so the dialectic is set up.

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## Text

“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.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 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. 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.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 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. 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.

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## Comment

“Salt of the earth”...Not always a complimentary description today. There’s an underlying assumption that a person so described will be worthy, utterly reliable, but a tad uncompromising – because, after all, salt can’t pretend to be sugar. The whole point of it is its saltiness. Great if you’re eating chips, not so welcome in a meringue! And of course this is something that Jesus recognises. It’s why he uses the analogy in the first place. Salt *should* make a difference. In 1st century Palestine, its greatest value was as a preservative – and it was much prized for that. We tend to focus more on its impact in recipes – but the principle holds good. Salt changes things. Once added to food, it might not be visible – but you’ll know that it is there. It often works to bring out the natural flavours – to make foods MORE like themselves – but if you add too much, the food becomes inedible.

Does that make “salt” a bit fundamentalist? Or, to look at this idea in reverse, does this mean that those who see life and faith through a more open and liberal lens, equate to salt that has lost its savour? We know that scientifically, the concept of salt becoming unsalty is nonsense. True salt is inherently stable. However, not everything that passed for salt in the ancient world was the genuine article – and impure compounds might well lose their saltiness, rendering them useless as a preservative or to enhance flavour. They *looked* OK but...

So – there’s no negotiating around the fact that Jesus wants and expects his disciples to be firm in their beliefs – and in the way that they live them out. And that isn’t always going to be the best way to win friends. Even a little serious engagement with the gospel principles presented in the Sermon on the Mount is going to challenge and discomfort those following another way.

And light? What about that? There’s a much-circulated urban myth, the story of an encounter between a large naval vessel and what at first seems to be another craft, heading on a collision course. The naval vessel requests that the other ship change course, but the response is “You change course”. The ship’s Captain attempts to pull rank “This is HMS Belligerent and I’m a Rear Admiral”...then comes the punch-line. “This is Royal Sovereign and I’m a light house. Your call”

That blazing beacon has a protective value which you ignore at your peril. So – light can be equally uncompromising. From Genesis onwards, “God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness”. Us and them. No scope for compromise. Infinite potential for conflict.

But wait. This is not just salt or light in isolation. This is salt *of the earth*, light *of the world*. It exists to benefit others, not simply for its own satisfaction – and in fact that agenda of wider benefit is inherent in the nature of both salt and light. Others will taste the food enhanced by salt, will find their way illuminated by the city on a hill...

Yes, both present a challenge – but within that challenge there is scope for a new understanding, a changed perspective. Living a Kingdom life enables others to

recognise its source...

*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

YOUR good works, though, will be of a very different order from the established pattern. Jesus rejects the suggestion that his way runs in opposition to the Torah, proclaiming that the Torah finds its fulfillment in his life and mission – but then goes on to assert that the righteousness he expects from his disciples must be infinitely greater than that of the current experts in the law and the prophets. It's not simple. To reject the law is to forfeit a place in the kingdom, but to keep it meticulously, yet without true righteousness, is no better. In calling his disciples into a kingdom, Jesus makes it possible that there will be those outside, a realisation that is as unwelcome as it is disturbing. "Them" and "us"; the basis for all conflict. Does this Scripture really give us a mandate to see the world in terms of kingdom citizens and eternally excluded outsiders? This view has inspired not only a particularly driven, anxious form of evangelism but also, at its extremes, become the justification for holy wars, waged against the other "for their own good".

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## Prayer

Blessing of Transformation

Your love, which is given for all,

**Alleluia! Amen.**

Your generosity, which opens space for hope, **Alleluia! Amen.**

Your nurturing, which builds a culture of peace, **Alleluia! Amen.**

Your delight, which celebrates diversity, **Alleluia! Amen.**

Your compassion, which seeks the best for all, **Alleluia! Amen.**

Your Respect, which enables us to live with difference,

**Alleluia! Amen.**

Your humility, which builds our dependence on God and on others, **Alleluia! Amen.**

