

Salt and Light for the Earth: the site of Christian ethics – are Christian ethics just for Christians?

Matthew 5:13-16; Romans 5: 12-4,17; Isaiah 58:6-10; Psalm 112

Last week as we began to reflect upon Jesus’ “sermon on the mount”,¹ I argued that it was not to be heard as a list of impossible ideals, but rather a *description* of the life of a people gathered by and around Jesus.² To be “saved”, is to be so gathered into the company of those who are living in the presence of God – that which Matthew calls “the Kingdom of Heaven”. This gathering of disciples is called the church – the *ecclesia*,³ the “called out ones” – and we have in Jesus’ sermon the constituting of such a company.

Living in this company will be challenging but not impossible. Jesus teaches that given the reality of the Kingdom, modelled, as it is, upon himself as its King, we should not be surprised to find among those who follow him, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who make peace, those known for their mercy and faithfulness – even those who are persecuted for his name’s sake – since this is Jesus’ own experience.

Jesus does not suggest that everyone who follows him will possess all these blessings all the time, but we can be sure that *some* will evidence them at different times and places, for these are the marks of Jesus himself. In this sense, far from being an impossible Christian ethic or

¹ Matthew 5:1-12 f.f.

² Much of this argument is shamelessly lifted from Stanley Hauerwas though also shamelessly adapted to the writer’s ends – ultimately arguing something quite different. Quotes from Hauerwas are not directly acknowledged here. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2006. Especially Ch.5 f.f. for a different argument.

³ The world commonly translated ‘church’ in the new testament had its origins in the free assemblies of the ancient Greek polis. The free citizens, regardless of rank or age, were called to assemble and make decisions on the life of the people.

even a recovery of the ethic of the *torah* (the mosaic law), ultimately, the beatitudes (which set the scene for the entire sermon), are a commentary on the life of the one who spoke them.⁴

To be connected to this one, we are told, will both be a blessing. But a blessing for who? It is one thing to locate God's blessing within the company of those who profess Jesus' name and seek to follow him, but is that as far as it goes? Where is this blessing for those outside the church? Is it practical or even appropriate to speak of relating Jesus' life and teachings to those who do not recognise him?

Luther didn't think so. He is recorded as saying that the Sermon on the Mount does not belong in city hall, for "one cannot govern" with it.⁵ This perception still has currency, not just in regard to Jesus' teaching but religion in general. On *Summer Noel*,⁶ Professor Jim Flyne – apparently, if the internet is to be believed, "an internationally acclaimed intelligence expert at Otago University"⁷ spoke on the writing of VS Nipur, in which Nipur critiques Middle Eastern society. Prof. Flynn said:

So many in the Islamic world, even those who are semi-urbanised, see as the solution to all their problems becoming a good Muslim – "if only we were good Muslims we wouldn't have all these problems of people gouging each other and exploitation, and we would be charitable to one another"... Well, it's like going to America and saying, "the solution to all our problems is if only we were good Christians". And you realise, of course, it's not a solution at all. It would mean fewer disputes over your neighbour's tree dropping leaves into your yard, and it would mean more contributions to the Community Chest, but it wouldn't solve the problem of American foreign policy, it wouldn't solve the problems of the environment, it

⁴ Again, this is very much at the heart of Hauerwas' reading of this text (*ibid*), even if he goes somewhere else with it than I do in this sermon.

⁵ Pinchas Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 4.

⁶ February 2011.

⁷ <http://beattiesbookblog.blogspot.com/2010/12/professor-jim-flynn-presents-torchlight.html>

wouldn't solve the problem of how to democratise the country and give ordinary people more of a voice...⁸

Religion for Flyne, then, is a private matter. People may exercise their, frankly trivial, spiritual values or even have religious experiences, but religion is of no great value beyond that, it is of no public import.

Flyne's perspective runs against the evidence of history, of course. When Constantine had his heavenly vision of Christ it set in train events which were to dramatically change the course of world history forever. The same could be said of the Reformation and, a few centuries later, the Great Evangelical Awakening which permeated every aspect of British society and from there the empire.

Yet, ironically perhaps, Flyne, finds support from within the church as well as without. In recent times Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in the maelstrom of fascist Germany, and Mennonite theologian John Yoder, writing from post-war imperial America, have given fresh impetus to the critique of what happens when the life and shape of the church becomes identified with the interests of wider society and the state. Whilst arguing staunchly for public faith, contra to Prof., Flyne, they do emphasise the separatedness of being God's people.⁹

More recently Stanley Hauwass and followers,¹⁰ have taken up the cause. The locus of Jesus' sermon and the behaviours it characterises, they argue, is the visible company of disciples. The life Jesus describes and calls his followers to, only has validity and power to the extent it is directly connected to this same Jesus who lives by his Spirit among his

⁸ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/summernoelle> Transcript / extract from podcast.

⁹ Such a sentiment was also expressed by the salvation army Lieutenant who addressed the Jesus March outside parliament in October 1972, when he said: "we are not here today to tell the government or the people of New Zealand what they should do. We are here to tell the government and the people of new Zealand what *we* intend to do. And that is...." (Ref TBS).

¹⁰ e.g. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation : the drama of Christian ethics*, Grand rapids, MI, 2004.

people. The Sermon, then, is principally to do with the life of the gathered people of God. As with Isaiah's prophecy we heard read earlier,¹¹ it is very much an old testament exclusivist model and is subversive of wider society, "the powers" of nation and empire, only to the extent that the people of God live in connection with their servant King – the risen but wounded Messiah – so that the nations may see from *outside* at what the Kingdom looks like.

...

There is much I would like to say about this. My reflection on these issues has occupied me ever since my days in the militant Boiler Makers Union in the '70's when, in the midst of a strike, I was told by an industrial chaplain (and Anglican priest still active in this Diocese), that this was no place for me to be as a Christian.

Time constraints here, makes adequate treatment of the issues impossible; but I would like to make just a brief reflection on our Gospel reading today, as a starting point for you to perhaps think on it some more.

...

Certainly, Jesus' talk of salting the earth and light on a hill would have resonated with those listening. The Abrahamic call and promise, and the call to faithfulness and holiness from Moses to the latter prophets, as I have noted already, was always about being a *separated* out people who bore witness to the character of God through their lives together. There was always a *missional* end in view.

In Genesis 12 we read that Abraham was to be blessed *so that the nations*

¹¹ Isaiah 58:6-10.

*would be blessed through him.*¹² The blessing was always given to be passed on. The torah was given so that the nations might know that those brought out of Egypt belonged to God and in them God could be seen. The light on the hill¹³ would have been clearly understood by those listening to Jesus as referring to Jerusalem – God’s city.¹⁴ Those outside the city could be attracted within the gates, but they were understood to be outside – there was always separation.

Luther had this kind of missiology in view when he spoke of the “two kingdoms” – the Kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God. The two were separate even if the latter acted as a prophetic call to the former.

Personally, however, if I may be so bold, I think Luther, and others like Hauwass with him, are wrong in their reading here – or at least only partly right. For two reasons:

Firstly, let’s look at our reading from Matthew...

Matthew is not arguing here for a “separation of church and state”, as it were. Quite the contrary. Yes, the warning Jesus is giving in our reading today, can well be seen as a caution to the people of God to fulfil their calling to embody God as a holy people in the midst of the nations. Yet I have no doubt this is why Matthew (writing especially to a Jewish audience), placed *both* these metaphors about salt *and* light *together* straight after his description of the blessings of the Kingdom of heaven:¹⁵ he is reminding us that if the *locus* of the sermon was within the church, its *horizon* is always beyond.

¹² Gn.12:1-3.

¹³ Matt.5:14.

¹⁴ 2Kg 19:31; Ps.48:2; Jol.2:32; Obd. 1:21. Note how this contrasts to Rev.21:1 *f.f.* where all the nations gather in the city.

¹⁵ *c.f.* Mark 4:21; 9:50; Luke 8:16; 11:33; 14:34-35 where the images are detached.

In understanding Matthew like this, I take an important clue from missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin.¹⁶ As critical as he was of the Constantinian /Christendom ‘settlement’, Newbigin insisted¹⁷ that we must be careful in our assessment of the errors of that arrangement.

“Much has been written,” he observed, “about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism [and gifted Rome], and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme. But could any other choice have been made? There can be no question”, Newbigin said, that the church has regularly fallen “into the temptation of worldly power.” But, he goes on: Should we conclude from this that the proper alternative was for the church simply to “have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? ... Do we really think that the cause of the gospel would have been better served if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a ‘Christian’ Europe? The fact is”, he notes, “that the Constantinian project had its origins in a creative response to a significant cultural challenge. There was in Constantine’s day, a spiritual crisis in the larger culture, and people “turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together. And for all the mistakes that were made along the way, it was nonetheless a good thing that the church actively took up this challenge.”

The “salting” metaphor supports Newbigin’s reading of this passage. It speaks more of *permeation* than *separation*, without denying the validity of either as a missional approach to society and culture. Newbigin’s

¹⁶ See here Mouw’s Musings – From the Fuller President (6 June 2010) <http://www.netbloghost.com/mouw/?p=146> Richard Mouw is president of Fuller Theological Seminary. For a full bio on Mouw, see http://www.netbloghost.com/mouw/?page_id=2 A similar (and very comprehensively argued) position is taken in Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*, IVP 2010.

¹⁷ Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), p.100-101.

challenge is to do both the text *and* our *context* justice.

Yet, more significant than contextual imperatives is the life of Jesus himself. Hauerwas is right to insist that the teachings of the sermon cannot be understood apart from the one who spoke them – the crucified Christ.

The incarnation is the key to grasping what is being said here: For *in* Jesus – the new Adam, the true human being – we find what it means for every human being to be truly human. To be “Christian”, then, to have “Christ in”, is not to be converted into some “super category”, but to become truly human. “Christian ethics” are “*human* ethics” and so are for everyone, everywhere.

This doesn’t mean that everyone will want to be “human”. It may well mean that God’s offering of himself in Christ will be rejected. This is always the risk, indeed it is the very risk God takes in Jesus. God risked becoming one of us, risked not just getting his hands dirty, but being rejected and having his body broken. Purity is one thing but righteousness – doing the right thing no matter what – is another.¹⁸

Jesus’ teachings as to what “fulfilling the law” meant, recognised not just the difficulties but also the *ambiguities* of choice when living in a fallen world. God chose not to separate himself from us but to become one of us and work through these ambiguities as part of that. It is in this light that we must read the text. As Saint Paul would later put it:

...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through

¹⁸ See 2 Cor.5:21. This was the risk at the heart of the mystery of God’s saving of humanity. Phil.2:5-11 explicates this mystery in its full glory.

Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness¹⁹ of God.²⁰

¹⁹ 'diakasune' / 'righteousness': not just the morally justified but living proof of God's faithfulness toward his creation – including humanity – that will not stop until the whole of creation is reconciled. See Brendan Byrne, *Reckoning with Romans: a contemporary reading of Paul's gospel*, M. Glazier Publishers, 1986., for a very readable treatment of this reading of Paul.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.