

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-20

“Be Salt and Be Light”

One thing was striking me when Grant was reading the first reading from Habakkuk – a word kept jumping up, one that we don't use anymore, Selah. Are you familiar with what Selah is? How many people here are familiar with what Selah is? It means pause – think about what you just heard or just read. It happens sometimes in the Psalms that will come up and say 'Selah' which will give a nice pregnant pause – to contemplate what has just transpired. That is what Habakkuk did when he was saying – take a second and think about what you just heard – there were some incredible words there.

Just like the incredible words that Jesus spoke in today's Holy Gospel which took place right after Jesus taught His followers what we call the Beatitudes. You know – '*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*' and this is all a part of the Sermon on the Mount. This is also a part of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus wanted to demonstrate the impact that the people who believe in Him would make on their world, and so He used two common examples that they would be familiar with: salt and light. Jesus' disciples would be like salt - creating a thirst in others for greater information, who would be wanting to discover why the believer is different. Salt also means that believers can serve as a preservative against the evils of society. Salt also purifies. Have you ever had a cut in the mount or a sore tooth, or even a sore throat? The doctor tells you to gargle with salt – because it also purifies. It really helps. It is so important for salt to maintain its basic character. If it fails to be salty, it has lost its purpose for existence and then should be thrown out. Being in the south with humidity sometimes pretty high – we can see saltshakers fail – with clumped up salt – and some people will put rice in the shaker to absorb the moisture – or else that salt is useless. – Restaurants have had to throw out the contents of their saltshakers.

Salt was something very precious at the time of Jesus. Salt was scraped and gathered from seashores, like the shore of the Dead Sea but it resulted in a salt that was absolutely chock full of impurities. Having been to the Dead Sea twice, I can tell you don't ever drink it! It is putrid. It is not salt – it is minerals – and those minerals smell. People used it, not to eat, but for other things - even with these impurities, it was used by people as a seasoning and as a preservative. They would salt fish. I can tell you that they didn't have salt pork! There was another use of salt that is known by a lot of people. As Jesus and the disciples would travel on the road from Jerusalem they would see clay ovens built next to houses on the roadside. These kinds of ovens had been around for ages, and each village had at least one large community oven for the whole village to use.

What they burned in these ovens was not wood, and they had to use something that was more readily available than wood - and so they used animal dung, mixed with salt and then molded into patties which were put in the sun to dry. If you burned this dung without a mixture of salt on the bare dirt floor of the oven it wouldn't produce much heat. In these large community ovens, they would put a flat slab of salt as a base on which the dried patties were placed. The bottoms of these large ovens were covered with a pretty thick layer of salt – and it would

generate heat for cooking and other things. Dried patties, mixed with salt, placed on a base of salt, gave off a pretty substantial amount of heat. The salt base at the bottom of the oven would be removed from the oven and thrown in a very convenient place – the street. The useless salt is thrown over the existing road surface which improved the footing as people walked on the road. To be the salt of the earth is to be the catalyst to start fires, spiritual fires for others. As Christians, as disciples of Christ, we are to make hearts burn and long for Jesus Christ and for the Word of God.

And then there is Jesus' example of light. Light shines and gives direction to others. Individuals Jesus described in verses 3-10 – the Beatitudes, would obviously radiate and point others to the path that Jesus has called them to follow. Their influence on others would be apparent, like a city on a hill or a lamp on its stand. I am sure that many of you have been on airplanes at night, and when you look out of the window and see cities or towns illuminated. It is amazing, but if you were to block that light or take a lamp and put something like a bowl over it (a clay container for measuring grain) would be totally useless for light. The light would not shine. It would be hidden – placed under a bowl. Jesus wants followers, those people who live – letting the light of Christ shine in them, so that others see their good deeds and give praise not to themselves, but to their Father in heaven. One who stands in God's righteousness by faith in Him has an intimate spiritual relationship with Him, like that of a child to his or her loving Abba, or father.

In verse 18 Jesus says, *“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”* Believers would know that everything had been accomplished when Jesus said in John 19:30 *“It is finished.”* With those words He died on the cross. Jesus wanted people to know the importance of what He had done, and sharing His love and His Gospel – even to the smallest detail, and that extended even to the smallest Hebrew letter, the "jot" (which was the *yôd*), and even to the smallest stroke of a Hebrew letter, the "tittle." In English a jot would be like the dot above the letter "i" and it looks like an apostrophe, and a 'tittle' could be described as the difference between a "P" and an "R". The small angled line that completes the "R" is just like a tittle. In some translations you might hear the Greek word *'iota.'* Jesus emphasized these things because letters make up words and even a slight change in a letter might change the meaning of a word and a sentence. We are not called to change anything in the Bible! Jesus said He would fulfill the Law by obeying it perfectly and in doing so, He would fulfill the prophets' foretelling of the Messiah and His kingdom. But the duty of the people was clear for the righteousness they were currently seeking, that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law—was insufficient for entering into the kingdom that Jesus was offering. The righteousness Jesus demanded was not merely external; it was a true inner repentant righteousness based on faith in God's Word. That sure sounds like letting Christ's light shine in us – through the things we think, do and say.

I think we need to remember that the same God who gave such intricate detail to Noah in building the ark, and Moses on how to build the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle and all of its

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contents is the same God who says we are to pay great attention to the detail of His Word. God gave great details to Moses about each type of offering and how it should be done. Just look at Leviticus. An example is Leviticus 2:13, “*Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.*” Jesus said, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*” (Matthew 5:17) A perfect example of this is when Jesus took Peter, James and John to a mountain in the northern part of Israel, and as recorded in Matthew 17:2-3, Mark 9:2-3, and Luke 9:28-36 – “*There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.*” Why Moses and Elijah – well, Moses is the one to whom God presented the Law, and Elijah represented all of the Prophets. Jesus stood between them as the absolute fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. There was no denying that.

The One who came to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets has called each one of us to be the salt of the earth; that we are to be the catalyst for bringing others to Jesus Christ, that we are to teach, to preach and through our example we are to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, for through His sacrificial love for us, He has made it possible for us to go home to be with Him for all eternity.

The need for teaching, for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, is more critical now than ever. The ministry of presence is so important. Sometimes when someone is not feeling so well – just going to see them makes all of the difference. You don’t have to say anything – just be there and listen to what is on their mind. You might see someone who has had a terrible disaster in their family. You might see them as Harvey’s or at Walmart, or even McKinnon Cattle. Sometimes it is just being there to say hello. Nothing happens by accident – I truly believe that. Sometimes just listening, just seeing them and giving them a wave as you drive by – the ministry of presence – just letting them know that you care. People know you are there, people know you care. Being there for someone who might be having a bad day – you don’t necessarily have to pray with them, but you can pray for them. Just to let them know that you care. People are hungry for the Word of God and sadly so many people who are not being fed. Some of you have personally witnessed Christ working, not only in your own lives but in other people’s lives. And you have also witnessed the lack of teaching the Word of God from friends and neighbors as well.

We are called, we are commanded, and we are expected by Jesus to share His Word. Each one of us is called to teach the Good News so that those who hear may believe, and those who believe may receive Jesus Christ, and those who receive Christ may receive eternal salvation. Just as God reached out beyond Himself to create and to love us, so are we called to reach out to others, to love and teach others the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. If we are not reaching out to others, we are not a reflection of the true loving image of God (we all know that we are made in the image and likeness of God) and we also know that we are not a reflection of God’s true loving nature and character – unless we share His light and love with others.

Jesus has taken away any excuse we may want to use for not doing as He commanded, for He said that *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20) What greater help do we need? Jesus said, *“You are the salt of the earth.”* Be a catalyst, be the change agents that God expects you to be and accept the mission to bring souls to Jesus Christ, and He will bless you with the enabling presence of His Holy Spirit. Remember these important words of Jesus and carry them with you today – shaping our behavior and treatment of others: *“let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16)