

Salt of the Earth

I suppose this phrase simply means “a decent sort” in common parlance. But what does Jesus mean by it in the Sermon on the Mount?

Jesus’ Theme

This first great Sermon in Matthew’s Gospel is directed towards the doing of God’s will. Any Jew would tell you that this is a matter of fulfilling the Law of Moses. Jesus would entirely agree; but his notion of *fulfilment* is a few steps ahead of others. He demands a radical conversion of life which is not satisfied by formal obedience, but seeks the holiness of God, and nothing less. For Jesus, the commandments are guides to holiness.

Salt and Light

There has been much fascinating debate about the precise meaning of *salt of the earth*. Does Jesus mean that his disciples help the world to taste right, and give it its proper savour? Does he mean that his followers act as a preservative? Does he want to evoke the Hebrew word “salty” which means “full of wisdom”? In ancient religion, salt used to be added to sacrifices and incense, and was thought of as making them pure. Are we to think of Christian disciples as purifying the world’s sacrifice or the world’s prayer? *Sharing someone’s salt* was thought of as becoming loyal to them; are the disciples to be the bond of loyalty for the earth? Salt is simply necessary for life; perhaps this fact explains Jesus’ saying. Perhaps several, or even all, of these things are intended. It doesn’t really matter. What should strike us, surely, is that Jesus says the disciples are what they are *for the world*, and not just for Israel. Jesus, says Matthew, already has *the world* in view as he begins to teach his Church. We’d expect this thought from Luke, who is a Gentile himself, and whose hero is Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles: Luke whose Simeon proclaimed Jesus as “a light to enlighten the Gentiles”. But the Jewish Matthew surprises us by calling *the disciples* “light of the world”. The phrase suggests immediately that the disciples’ own vocation is to belong to others, to live for others, even to be made holy and to be saved for others. Our faith is indomitably a community faith.

Living for others

We sometimes think of our belonging to Christ in purely personal terms, as if we’re all saved individually, in penny numbers. There is much in the tradition of the churches that promotes

this idea, especially in certain Protestant churches (“Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour!”). In fact, the New Testament seems to be full of a quite different understanding, in which the life of each of us has its influence on others. Paul’s image of the Body of Christ, where each of us is a necessary member, has much more truth in it. We’re not all paddling our little boats, working out our individual salvations. Our true likeness to Christ is not in a long series of individual attempts at imitation (like those awful shows where thirty idiots do impressions of Elvis Presley). It’s a matter of our lives becoming part of the body of the Lord, into whom we are incorporated; to this life we contribute more and more as the work of redemption proceeds in us. So rather than thinking of every Christian life as a lonely monument on a pedestal, we should think of the steady demolition of selfishness, the deepening of relationships, the progress of loyalty and belonging and giving which bind us into the Body of the Lord, so that the mysterious oneness called “communion” may appear in us and be seen by others. This picture of salvation is much richer than the other, and it illuminates the way in which disciples are disciples *for the world* and not just for themselves.

Let Your Light Shine In Their Sight

I don’t know if you have ever thought of your life as a light for others; I’d be ready to bet that it is. But it doesn’t mean you’ve got to make yourself into a human star, a brilliant human being - an Einstein or a Katherine Hepburn. Your life will be a light for others insofar as you are illuminated by Christ, and by your belonging to Christ. This means that our faith is never a lonely and exhausting task. The Sermon on the Mount will go on to explain how this belonging bears fruit in goodness and holiness. When he said these things, Jesus was issuing a call from God to Israel, at the most critical moment of its history; he was telling Israel to be the light of the world, as Isaiah had prophesied. It is by shining clearly, reflecting this single light, that we become true disciples, and the Law is fulfilled in us. “Let your light shine in the sight of others, that they may glorify the Father.” I thank God for the people he has shown to me, as I try to serve his Church: those holy people who forgive, and lay down their lives in kindness, who keep their promises and recognise Christ in the poor, and who constantly radiate hope and goodness. Salt of the earth!

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