



**Saint Margaret's
Anglican Episcopal Church**

Budapest, Hungary

**Isaiah 58:1-9a, (9b-12); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20
Psalm 112:1-9, (10)**

One of the distinguishing features of the Gospel of Matthew is its division into five rather long discourses of our Lord. The discourses themselves are of course interspersed with miracle stories and healings, as are also found in the other

Gospel accounts, as well as the recounting of our Lord's long journey from Galilee in the North to the holy city, Jerusalem, and his death. Scholars have long pondered what to make of the discourses, assigning them various themes and names.

Arguably, the most famous of the five discourses in Matthew is the very first one, popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount, from which our Gospel narrative this morning is taken. The name itself already tells you something about the discourse and its importance, for the mount of the Sermon on the Mount represents for Matthew the Mount of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Jesus is here giving us, in other words, the new law of his New Covenant.

This first of Jesus's discourses consists of many saying of our Lord, including the beloved Beatitudes, sometimes called the basis, or even constitution, of Christian faith and belief; as well as the Lord's Prayer, which we shall recite later in this service, as we do every Sunday. For that matter, I suspect many of us here this morning also pray the Lord's Prayer every day in any case. Our Gospel account this morning follows closely upon the Beatitudes; and as some scholars believe, is an elaboration upon them.

Our Lord, apparently speaking directly to his disciples, as he does in the last of the nine Beatitudes, calls them, the disciples, salt and light, two seemingly disparate elements or metaphors for the life and work of any disciple of Christ, yes, ourselves included. As you can imagine, salt was a big deal in the ancient world and an important industry, as I suspect it is today, though we rarely hear about it probably because salt is so plentiful in our world. Too plentiful, many nutritionists might say. In ancient times, people were even sometimes paid in salt allotments, giving us our contemporary Latinate word, salary. If you make a salary today, you are earning your salt.

And presumably you are making a difference in the world, large or small. And this seems to be what our Lord is implying about the disciples and discipleship. Following our Lord is to be no bland or boring exercise. It is not something we can do by rote or rule. There has to be some flavour about it, some zing, some taste of the divine. Being the salt means making a difference in our world and in the lives of others. In a way, it also implies earning our Christian keep, earning our spiritual salary. Proclaiming and living the Gospel is quite simply our job. It is what we do, who we are.

Now, for our Lord to also suggest that his disciples might be "the light of the world" must surely have seemed a stretch at the time, more hope than reality, even or perhaps especially to the disciples themselves. Keep in mind that these are some of the very first words of our Lord, spoken early on in Matthew's account of the Gospel. The disciples had little going for them by the lights of this world, no pun intended. There was more of Jesus' bushel-basket about them than lampstand.

Yet "let your light shine before others," is exactly what our Lord exhorts. Be the light. Become "the city on the hill," which cannot be hid. Become, in other words, what you are already but which on the other hand you, for your blindness, have not yet seen within yourselves. The disciples

of course ended up doing just that. They became the light, or at least the beacon of the light. Otherwise, we would not be sitting here today in Vienna talking about it.

But it is never about our own light. Jesus hastens to remind his disciples, and us, that our good works, our lights, must instead “give glory to the Father in heaven.” The paradox then is that the light within each of us comes not from inside ourselves but from without, precisely from outside ourselves. The light within each of us is but a reflection of the divine light at work in our lives, a reflection of the divine wisdom or enlightenment, which leads us to the Gospel in the first place.

Needless to say, light is a powerful force, as any physicist could tell us, and yet at the same time it is ephemeral and passing. Nothing we know of exceeds it in speed. Concentrated into lasers and other exotic beams, it can cut through steel; yet put your hand over your eyes, and the light disappears. Artists too become famous for their ability to capture light in their paintings. Rembrandt for instance or Caravaggio, both artists obsessed with light and darkness, are masters of what in art circles is called *chiaroscuro*. They would have well understood, it seems to me, our Lord’s simile of bushel-basket and lampstand. For them, light is life itself. And indeed, light is among the first of God’s creations without which life as we know it is not possible.

Yet in many ways, our world remains as dark a place as it has ever been, perhaps in some instances even darker still. Just a week or two ago, we commemorated, as we do every year, those who lost their lives in the Holocaust, arguably the darkest of all times. Given the current political and social climate around the globe and right here in our own corner of the Kingdom, some might say the world is again approaching the darkness of that earlier, yet all too recent, age. Yet, it is always tempting to shield our light, much as we might protect a candle flame from a breeze, perhaps even placing it under a bushel-basket, something which I and the fire-marshal do not recommend.

Salt and light; the first, surely representing the elements of the earth itself, the place we call home; the second, that mysterious force not even physicists grasp entirely and yet without which our existence would not be maintained. In these two metaphors, our Lord makes clear that discipleship, rooted on terra firma, is yet also the power of the divine light within each of us.

Amen.

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