

Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, falls on the 2nd of February, and can be taken as marking the end of the season of Epiphany. We now move into a period of “Sundays in Ordinary Time” ahead of Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday – which this year will be on the 22nd of February.

We are very much familiar with the idea of Lent being a season of preparation and penitence. But it feels like, just as we start to turn our faces towards Lent, we are today beginning another little season of preparation as if to ready us for our Lenten themes. We may well hear today’s Isaiah 58 passage again on Ash Wednesday as it is one of the options set down for that day; and today’s segment from Matthew’s Gospel sets the scene for the Ash Wednesday portion from Matthew 6, also part of the Sermon on the Mount.

After the blessings of last week’s Beatitudes, we may find ourselves feeling a bit “Lent-ish”, a bit in need of repenting in sackcloth and ashes, as we hear these strong words of Jesus all about Law and commands:

“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. ... I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

There are a variety of responses we’re tempted to make to these emphatic and uncompromising words:

- Noting that when Jesus talked of “the Law or the Prophets” he was referring to the Old Testament, we might be tempted to suggest that as Christians we’re under no obligation. Some have gone so far as to suggest that Jesus’ original words were in fact reversed: “I have not come to fulfil them but to abolish them.”
- We might want to take a different tack, suggesting that Jesus’ words to his disciples were limited to Jesus’ own time and have no application to us today.

- We might be tempted to just quietly ignore the apparent implications of these words. We live what we think of as “real life” as best we can in our own best interests and come to church on Sunday to do the God part of life in our accustomed way. It is so easy to separate worship and “real life”, and to see neither as having much bearing on the other.
- We might find ourselves taking these words of Jesus deeply to heart – “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” – and to then live in fear that our inability to perfectly uphold the laws of God means that we will be damned.
- Following on from this fear we might become people who work hard at figuring out exceptions and permissions, wriggle room, excuses for softening the application of the Law, trying to make the Law less extreme and unattainable.

And while these different approaches are taken by members of the Church, from the outside the world watches on, thinking either that the whole Christian thing must be a nonsense because its demands are impossible, or that Christians must be hypocrites if they assert a moral vision they cannot themselves keep, or that this is mere “religion”, a set of practices that some find comfort in, but which have no application to daily life.

From the outside the world watches.

The watching world is vitally important in all this. We are, as Jesus said, “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”.

When Jesus addressed these words to his disciples – “you are the salt of the earth”, “you are the light of the world” – the word translated “you” refers to the collective.

These are words addressed not just individually, but to his disciples – and to us the Church following – as a group, a people.

And then we recall that God’s purpose from the beginning was to form a people to be the instrument through which God could reach the world. God’s call to Abraham and promise to make him a great nation was framed within the purpose that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”;¹ and the language of the disciples being “the

¹ Genesis 12:1-3

light of the world” harks back to Isaiah’s prophecy about the role of God’s servant, serving not just for the people of God, but to be a “light for the Gentiles”.²

The community of Jesus’ followers is to be a model community living in obedience to God: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city set on a hill. This task of modelling obedience is an integral part of the community’s mission: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” The church is a demonstration plot in which God’s will can be exhibited.³

We are salt and light. But I wonder if we have a sense of struggle about that role in the age and culture in which we live. We find it harder and harder to articulate and press for Christian values and principles to be upheld. For some of us that means we lose courage, so that we just become silent. For others of us, the response is to struggle and fight, becoming perhaps more strident.

But before we think about how we might approach the watching world, I think we need to be clearer about how we should see Jesus’ words and what our attitude to the Law and commands ought to be.

The first thing is to state emphatically, as Jesus did, that they stand. As we read on through the Sermon on the Mount we will find Jesus is not watering down anything: in fact, he does away with a permissiveness that had crept into the oral teaching and interpretation of the Law.

New Testament scholar Richard Hayes writes,

The difficulty of living in conformity with the New Testament vision does not, however, let us off the hook: my experience of struggle and failure to respond to the New Testament’s challenge concerning possessions does not authorise me to disregard the New Testament’s summons, or to pretend that the New

² Isaiah 49:6; see also Isaiah 42:6

³ Hayes, *Moral Vision*, p.97

Testament does not mean what it says, or to devise less costly standards for myself and for the church.⁴

Before we respond to the impossibility of upholding God's moral absolutes by giving up or being fearful, we need to remember that Jesus fulfilled the Law for us. Despite his own perfect obedience, he took upon himself the consequences of our rebellion and failure.

Jesus says "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven". It sounds a bit like this is figuring out what is the threshold mark for a pass – perhaps the problem with the Pharisees was that they fell below the 50% mark, and we need to do just a bit better in order to squeak through. But that can't be right if the law is not to be watered down.

Rather, the righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law is that of *Christ, and it is his righteousness that gives us entry into the kingdom*. In his excellent book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that the obedience of the Pharisees

was never more than imperfect. With the disciples also righteousness could only take the form of obedience to the law. No one who failed to do the law could be accounted righteous. But the disciple had the advantage over the Pharisee in that his doing of the law is in fact perfect. How is such a thing possible? Because between the disciples and the law stands one who has perfectly fulfilled it, one with whom they live in communion. They are faced not with a law which has never yet been fulfilled, but with one whose demands have already been satisfied. The righteousness it demands is already there, the righteousness of Jesus which submits to the cross because that is what the law demands.⁵

And then as a result of Christ's work on the cross, and his sending of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, we find that our righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees in

⁴ Hayes, *Moral Vision*, p.469

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp.124-125

the additional sense that now it is not just about right actions, but is also about a right heart. This need is pointed to in the issue that Isaiah addresses in today's reading. Their action of fasting was not effective in building a relationship with God because it was entirely self-serving. As important and helpful as spiritual disciplines are, they are quite ineffective if the heart is wrong, if they are wrongly motivated. Fasting is a discipline that reminds us of our dependence on God, challenges our fears about scarcity, confronts our temptation to take more than we need. If rightly motivated, then one should expect the discipline of fasting to lead to a gradual transformation in the community's attitude toward those who do not have enough. Clearly this was not happening in Isaiah's community.

One of the blessings that flows from Christ's work is the fulfilment of what God promised through the prophets: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts"⁶ and "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes."⁷

Our efforts at keeping the Law, the commandments, is part of how we honour God, part of how we express gratitude to him. Our efforts in law-keeping are also part of how we are formed to be a distinctive people for the sake of the world.

We may do this more or less well. There will be those who will be evaluated greater or lesser in the kingdom ... but because of Christ's work of fulfilment, *all* who cleave to him will indeed enter the kingdom.

We won't succeed in perfectly keeping the Law. And that matters in one sense, in that to become casual about it denies the grace of the one who gives us the gift of the kingdom. But in another sense our failure doesn't matter, because Christ has already dealt with that failure for us.

And we need to be realistic: our imperfection is a reflection of the age in which we find ourselves. Richard Hayes expresses it this way:

We must never forget that the eschatological reservation, the "not yet," is an integral part of the New Testament's understanding of new creation. To

⁶ Jeremiah 31:33

⁷ Ezekiel 36:27

acknowledge that the kingdom is not fully realised in our midst is not to compromise the New Testament's moral vision; it is, rather, to respect it. We cannot suppose that all our lives can be lived in the first enthusiasm of Pentecost; our ethical decisions and our actions must be performed over the long haul in the midst of a creation that still groans awaiting redemption. To acknowledge this truth will enable us in the church to admit our own fallibility and sinfulness, to live patiently with the dissonance between the eschatological vision and the present reality of our lives.⁸

So what might we say to a watching world? In brief summary, it might be something like this:

If there is, as I believe, a Creator, then there is a purposefulness about existence. Laws are necessary for human community and flourishing. Just because a law can't always be upheld doesn't mean it should be abolished. (For example, stealing is a wrong. If someone steals a loaf of bread to feed a starving child, we address that compassionately and appropriately in judgement and any action that might be taken, but we don't suggest that this means that we should do away with the law and say that stealing is right: it remains wrong).

We tell the watching world the good news that while these absolutes apply, we recognise that we fail. Our failure does not mean that it is nonsense or meaningless. We tell the watching world that we have been set free from the consequences of our failure to keep the law (but not released from the duty to keep it). And we tell the watching world that this offer of freedom is available to all who would accept Christ's invitation.

Candlemas marked the end of the season of Epiphany, the season of focussing of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. However, even today we have new revelation of Christ as the fulfiller of the Law. We now move into a period of "Sundays in Ordinary Time", and as I have noted before the word "Ordinary" prompts me to think of daily life. The revelation of God and daily life should never be separated in the lives of Christians; worship or religion and daily life are interconnected; and we, as

⁸ Hayes, *Moral Vision*, p.469

we go about keeping the law in daily life, are part of the ongoing revelation of God to the world; we are salt and light.

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