

**“Living the law” a sermon based on Matthew 5:13-20 and Isaiah 58:1-9  
preached at Knox Presbyterian Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright  
on 9 February 2020.**

Let me begin with a Whakatauki, a saying - Kia rui ai te kākano o te tumanako, ki roto i te māra o te hinengaro, haumi e, hui e, taiki e! Sowing the seeds of hope, into the garden of the mind. Join it, unite it, it is done!

The gospel reading today begins so positively, a tasty meal in a light filled restaurant. But it seems to end with us out the back, paying the bill by washing the dishes in the kitchen. We begin with taste and colour and brightness, with salt and lamps and candles and houses brightly lit. We begin with Jesus saying – you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Notice how direct he is. Not, if you behave yourself, then you will be salt. Not, if you try harder, then you will be light. Not, if you fulfil these requirements, then you will be salt or light. He is telling his followers, without qualification. This is who you are. This is your identity. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. It is not something you need to claim for yourselves. It is not something you need to prove to anyone. This is who you are. And then follows: Don’t snuff out what you have to contribute. Don’t hide it away or put it in a corner or let it become tasteless. Don’t stop anyone from being salt and light. It depicts what the followers of Jesus offer the world. So we have that in the eating place, and then its as if we go into the kitchen.

Yet, just six verses later Matthew gives us another Jesus statement: “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven ...” and then “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Now there are, according to my sources, about 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures. By the time I have learned and tried to keep 613 commandments, I sense the light will have faded and the salt will have diluted a tad. It is not uncommon, it seems to me, to contrast light and law, taste and righteousness. The mere mention of righteousness can awaken in us images of a strict narrow legalistic puritanical Victorian Sabbatarian moralistic self-righteousness. I need more adjectives I think. Chewy and solid, but not a meal we rush to consume.

Matthew though has arranged these sayings so they flow together. How can we hold them together as Matthew does? We haven't done too well at times. I have heard stories of how on Saturday people need to polish their shoes because Sunday was for worship and rest. We still hear faith presented as if it is about keeping a clear set of rules about sexuality. For many people, Christianity seems to be about doing the dishes out the back. But in reaction to legalism, people have swung the other way, especially in downplaying the significance of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus has come, they say, so law and rules no longer apply. We have moved from law to grace, from commandments to spirit, from prescribing how we are to behave to the principle of love. Matthew though records Jesus say: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil."

How can our righteousness exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees? How can our righteousness taste good and shed light?

Isaiah proclaims righteousness – "Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin." When Jesus speaks about righteousness exceeding scribes and Pharisees, this is what he is talking about, being a community of mercy and justice. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. How can we be a spicy righteous people in this land of Aotearoa?

Last week, distinguished Maori leaders spoke of the tragedy of how children are taken from mothers and whanau. Now I know we lament when action is not taken sooner to keep children safe. I know there are times to move children to safety. I am not speaking about whether the police or Oranga Tamariki did the right thing. But as a comment on us as a people, as one people, he iwi tahi tatou, to be reminded that in our nation, just last May, 14 armed police went to a family's home to take a child from its mother. Imagine that. This is what the mother said – "So what happened was, armed police came with their guns to our house at 11 o'clock at night to do an uplift. It was very traumatising. Everything was quiet and peaceful. The child they wanted to take was safe and asleep in bed. There was no danger or anything that would justify why the police would barge into our home in the middle of the night,

armed ... ” Perhaps nothing epitomises the deep cleaving of our country more than that moment.

We are increasingly honouring the law of the Treaty, and what of its Spirit. As with the call of Jesus in relation to the gospel, we are invited to go further than the law, to live in the spirit of the Treaty. Jesus invites us to a righteousness that exceeds the scribes and Pharisees. To help us we are fortunate that in our land we have people of light and salt. The governance group that published the report last week included Dame Naida Glavish, Dame Tariana Turia Lady Tureiti Moxon and Professor Mason Durie and more. Last week a statue of Dame Whina Cooper was dedicated. She once said – ‘Some people were wild at me. They said things like, “Oh that woman. She’s taking the part of a man.” I thought to myself, I suppose they’re partly right. But I’ve never stopped the men doing anything. I’d been waiting for years for men to put the world to rights. And they hadn’t. Well – God gave me eyes to see, a head to think, a tongue to talk. Why not use them, why not share what I know? That’s what I kept thinking. That’s what kept me going.’ Kelvin Davis spoke about when Pakeha will be as much at home in Maori society as Maori have to be in Pakeha society.

At various times in our nation’s history, the followers of Jesus have lived the call to be pockets of spicy community. James Stephen, the brother in law of William Wilberforce, was the permanent undersecretary in the Colonial Office around the time major Pakeha settlement began. He was profoundly influenced by the life and teachings of Christ, and he was a big part of the British side of the Treaty’s story. James Stephen drafted the instructions which were given to William Hobson when he was sent to New Zealand in 1840. These instructions included: “All dealings with the Aborigines for their Lands must be conducted on the same principles of sincerity, justice, and good faith as must govern your transactions with them for the recognition of Her Majesty’s Sovereignty in the Islands. Nor is this all. They must not be permitted to enter into any Contracts in which they might be ignorant and unintentional authors of injuries to themselves. You will not, for example, purchase from them any Territory the retention of which by them would be essential, or highly conducive, to their own comfort, safety or subsistence. The acquisition of Land by the Crown for the future Settlement of British Subjects must be confined to such Districts as the Natives can alienate without distress or serious inconvenience to themselves. To secure the observance of this rule will be one of the first duties of their official protector.”

If only we had enacted that. Here was Stephen living his faith, authentically and genuinely. Salt and light. The Treaty itself grew out of that faith. The Te Reo name for the Treaty is 'Te Kawenata o Waitangi' ('the Covenant of Waitangi'). Hobson said to each signing chief "He iwi tahi tatou" ("we are one people"). The missionary, Henry Williams, had come up with those words based on the letter to the Ephesians. Jesus says we are salt and light, to live righteousness. That righteousness suggests that working in the kitchen, living that kind of righteousness can be tasty and shed light. Like a marae kitchen. And we have the great joy of living that light in Aotearoa.

Mā te whakaatu ka mōhio Mā te mohio, ka mārama Mā te mārama, ka mātau  
Mā te mātau, ka ora.

By discussion comes understanding By understanding comes the light By the  
light comes wisdom By wisdom comes life everlasting.

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