

## SALT, LIGHT AND MEEK

The greatest collection of Jesus' teachings are right here.

Beginning with the Beatitudes and following on to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

Small, short, simple statements – yet with such profound challenges for us all if we are to be followers of Christ.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

(Matthew 5: 3–12)

One of the things we need to do as Christians is to keep returning to these words, keep reading them, keep thinking about them, keep meditating on them, keep learning from them.

We need to hear them again and again.

Like a few people in here (I guess) I grew up with Monty Python.

The original title for the show was *Owl Stretching Time*, but was changed to *Monty Pythons Flying Circus* at the last minute. Neither name made any sense. Both are pretty bizarre but what Monty Python certainly did was “stretch” – they stretched the limits of comedy, they did sketches the likes of which had not been seen before. They were pioneers in what became known as alternative comedy and they stretched what was regarded as acceptable to be shown on TV.

After huge success on television they began to make films and the most notorious of them all was *The Life of Brian* – very controversial at the time!

It was described by critics as a film that made fun of Jesus, but what in fact they did (to avoid charges of blasphemy) was to create a different character called Brian who lived in the same place at the same time and who gets mistaken for Jesus, and attracts his own following.

Nonetheless there was a huge stramash back in the day. It was considered to be at least a bit scandalous, though I'm sure if it came out tomorrow there would be little backlash. Society is a bit different these days.

One of the most memorable scenes is their take on the Sermon on the Mount.

In this scene Jesus is delivering the famous words of the Beatitudes but the camera is focussed on a few folk at the very back of the large crowd. Because of the distance, people are struggling to hear what Jesus is saying.

Someone at the back is trying to be helpful. He turns to the others around him.

*'I think he said "Blessed are the cheese-makers".'*

*'Blessed are the cheese makers? What is so special about the cheese-makers?'*

Someone else in the crowd tries to be helpful...

*'I don't think it's supposed to be taken literally. He means to refer to any manufacturer of dairy products.'*

Then later on they hear Jesus say that *'the meek shall inherit the earth'*.

A woman says,

*'Oh the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh that's nice, innit?'*

*'I'm glad they're getting something because they've had a hell of a time....'*

In Monty Python they made jokes out of people being at the back of the crowd and struggling to actually hear Jesus' words.

We don't have that problem.

But one issue we **do** have with the Sermon of the Mount is translating the words of Jesus into words for our time.

Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek. But Jesus didn't speak Greek. He spoke a language called Aramaic. Matthew had to translate Jesus' Aramaic words into Greek words. He had to decide what Greek words he would use to translate what Jesus was saying.

Then the translators of our English Bibles had to decide which English words to use to translate the Greek words Matthew has written.

Of course this complication is basically true of the whole Bible.

And one of the amazing things about the Bible is the accuracy of so much of these translations. But occasionally we can get it slightly wrong.

It brings us back to the Meek. What does that word mean?

Humble?

Submissive?

Servile?

Walkover?

Doormat?

I'm sure that first word (humble) might be seen as a virtue, after all, it's better to be humble than arrogant or boastful, or full of self-importance.

But the others words we associate with "meek" are pretty grim.

Being servile or passive or a doormat for others – is that good?

Is this really the best translation of the word that Jesus actually used?

Most Bible scholars today think not.

One of them called Harvey Cox argues that the only reason 'meek' keeps appearing still in Bibles these days is that the blessings on the meek have been assumed for so many centuries that it would seem as controversial to change it now, without putting a big explanation at the foot of the page!

So what *should* it be?

A Bible scholar and linguist from New Zealand called Warren Carter works as a Professor of New Testament and has a special interest in the Gospel of Matthew. He points out that the word translated in our Bible's as "meek" did not really mean gentle, mild or passive. It meant simply "powerless."

So the beatitude we usually read as:

*"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth",*

would really be better translated as:

*"Blessed are the powerless, for they will inherit the earth."*

And of course that ties in with Luke's gospel where Jesus says

*"Blessed are the poor, for the Kingdom of God is theirs."*

(Luke 6:20)

God's concern for the poorest and marginalised and powerless is one of the clearest and most repeated truths in the Bible.

In our hymn today, David Haas gets it about right.

*"Blest are they, the lowly ones;  
they shall inherit the earth."*

In God's kingdom things are reversed.

It's a kingdom of surprises.

It's a kingdom where things are turned upside down, and justice is finally done.

There's one other thing to point out. Our reading today takes us a bit past the Beatitudes to where Jesus says, *"You are the salt of the earth."*

And *"You are the light of the world."*

I think the interesting thing (and striking thing) about these two wee phrases is the word "*are*"!

You **are** salt and light!!!!

It's not that God wants us to be.

Not that it's something to aspire to.

Not that we might become so if we just try hard enough.

You are the light of the world and you are the salt of the earth.

We are that right now – already!

How can that be?

It doest mean we are all necessarily doing a good job.

But we are all making an impact on others around us for good or ill.  
 Every single one of us.  
 Not just the big guns.

Our faith makes a big splash for good when we think of famous saintly people like St Francis,  
 or Dorothy Day and MLK in America,  
 Oscar Romero in El Salvador,  
 Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Neimoller confronting Nazi Germany,  
 Mother Theresa caring for the dying,  
 Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton and Richard Rohr teaching on prayer and spirituality,  
 Desmond Tutu standing up against apartheid.

It takes a dive when we have abusive priests,  
 so called 'Christian' world leaders who start wars, lack compassion, and practice racism and other blatant forms of discrimination,  
 where we see church ministers who burn Korans and preach hate.

But it's not just the famous names and people in news headlines that shape our opinions on faith.  
 Many of the people (in fact most of the people) who make an influence in our lives are ordinary people we have met who perhaps in a small way have made the world seem a kinder or a worse place.

And we are having that same affect on others around us.

Where do people get their information and form their opinions on Christianity?  
 It's not usually through reading books, watching TV or studying scripture.  
 They look at ordinary Christians that they know and its what we say and do and believe that actually has the most effect.

The truth is that we influence people around us all the time - for better or for worse.  
 We can't all do everything but we can all do something.

For some years now I have been the Chair of SCANA. This is a big issue of faith for me.

For years I have also been involved in work with asylum seekers. I have been part of a few organisations.

This too is a big issue of faith.

But there are so many other great causes to care about. We can't totally involve ourselves in everything.

I've given up most of my official connections to asylum seeker organisations, but I am still involved in a smaller way.

I'm about to stand down as Chair of SCANA because I'm going to be doing some new work with the Church of Scotland, but I'll still be involved in a lesser way.

Everyone here will have their own particular challenges to face.  
We can't all do everything but we can all do something.

The point is that it's not a question of us having an influence.  
We are each making our own mark on the world.

It's a question of what kind of impact we are making on the world and on people around us.  
Are we drawing people towards Jesus, or pushing them away?

In these crazy recent times it has never been more important for Christians to be seen standing up for what is right and just and joining our voices with others who long for a decent, more caring world.

The almost spontaneous women's marches all around the US was a hopeful sign of light in the darkness.

So were the gatherings last week at the Donald Dewar statue and George Square and members of this congregation right here took part in those.

Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

We all have a light to shine in the world.

As author Anne Lamott says; *"Lighthouses don't go running around an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining."*

Lighthouses just stand and shine wherever they are.

That's our job too.

Matthew 5:1-16

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