

HAPPINESS & BLESSINGS, SALT & LIGHT

Mt 5.1-16 Is 58.7-10 1Cor 2.1-5

We had a whole school Mass for the beginning of the school year this week, and I reflected with our 520 or so students, staff, family members and parishioners, on the way in which Jesus engaged people at all levels and stages of life, as he called children forward and spoke of their openness and simplicity, in terms of appreciating what is truly important in life and living our faith. His is not a call to be simple-minded and unquestioning, but to be open to the world around us and be appreciative of our place in it and so our responsibility to make good choices, to be kind, to encourage, accept and forgive ourselves and others, as we grow and change, ask questions, think for ourselves, trying to make good choices along the way, as is God's will, to live, love and learn well.

I used the example of the recent terrible bushfires to reflect on the simple, but effective ways in which people can be there for, and support each other in times of danger, fear and loss. *Fire*, a recent book written after Black Saturday (by Jackie French and illustrated by Bruce Whatley) expresses it well: ***“Riches are a loved one’s hand, Safety from the flame-fed land. Leaves are ash and trees are dust. Black bones of houses, cars are rust. Earth that is too dry to cry; Grey birds fall from ash-grey sky. But fires are fought in many ways; Long after all the flame-filled days. By those who give and love and share; Who build or tend a world burnt bare. Friendship fills what has been lost; Friendship never counts the cost. And time itself defeats the pain; As dry air thickens into rain. Earth’s green children have come back; Peering from the world of black. King fire has a short harsh reign; Good things will grow again.”*** Words of encouragement, offering hope and promise looking forward, help us to reflect on our priorities in life, and the true value of love, family and friendship, working together.

And now, with the year's routine getting back into gear, here we are reflecting on the fundamentals of Jesus' teaching. About 40 years ago in Croydon, I was taken on by a chap for playing down The Ten Commandments, as he perceived it (although I did not!), after I'd suggested that Jesus' teaching was an upgrade, his *Beatitudes* (8 here, 4 in Luke) reflecting a spirit or positive attitude, in the way Christian life should be lived, with no direct rules or regulations or structures as to how Christian communities were to evolve in time. I mentioned last week that Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* (or *Plain for Luke*), is up there with the top speeches of all time, coming in at 33rd, just ahead of Martin Luther King's ***“I Have a Dream”!*** (Not that popularity should count for too much!) Obviously, classification is arbitrary, but in even in the secular world, Jesus' words ring true, as a dramatic and radical departure from the eye for an eye system of justice of the ancient world, remembering too the retribution, violence and blood and guts of the Old Testament.

I include The Beatitudes in today's Gospel, because we missed them last week, and they are so much at the heart of Jesus' teaching. Described as *Matthew's Masterpiece*, and his greatest composition, based on the original call to materially provide for the poor, offer empathy to the bereaved and feed the hungry, then expanded to a certain spirit in which life should be lived in love. This is then followed up with the need for justice, gentleness, mercy and peace, with the reality of persecution looming in the life of the early church. In this new Kingdom Jesus proclaims, it is the responsibility of all who hear his Word and wish to belong, to reflect these qualities in their lives.

Personally, I prefer the translation as *happy* rather than *blessed*, but the meaning is the same, a state of mind because of God's loving care and protection of the weak, as was the Oriental king's duty, back in those times, but Jesus tells us that's not good enough, because now it's for all to respond to his words.

Once again, Pope Francis has a helpful insight, describing the Beatitudes as *a Christian's ID card*, because *"They outline the face of Jesus himself; his way of life."* He adds: *"There's a difference between pleasure and happiness. The former does not ensure the latter and sometimes puts it at risk, while happiness can also live with suffering, which often happens."*

"Matthew transforms a short messianic manifesto into a program of life, a list of desirable qualities or virtues." (Quoting the Jerome Biblical Commentary)

Directly following on from this, Jesus applies the practical, down to earth images of salt and light, often a Gospel used for graduations, as a reminder to all that we are to demonstrate the qualities represented in these metaphors.

As a scientist, whatever Jesus thought, I like to take the images a bit further, as NaCl in chemical terms is a stable compound (as opposed to the dangerous elements of sodium and chlorine!), still commonly used for enhancing taste (*though not good for blood pressure!*), not so much as an essential preservative, as it was back then, but also reflects classic ionic bonding and hexagonal close packed cubic crystalline structure. It can't lose its taste, but can be tainted and so becomes useless (*also used to melt ice on the roads in winter in Canada! And so rust the cars as well!!*).

Then there's light, which was not so taken for granted when electricity did not exist with the flick of a switch. In terms of physics, is it a wave or is it a particle, as it displays the properties of both in different ways. And nothing can go faster than the speed of light, can it? It's why we still use candles as part of our rituals, particularly focussing on the Easter candle, reflecting the light of Christ, and reminding you and me that we are to be beacons of that light in our lives, in the way we take his values to heart and apply them to ourselves, and bring light, enthusiasm and happiness into the lives of others.

Brendan Byrne SJ also puts it well: *“Two images – salt and light – dominate... The community of disciples, to whom Jesus has just addressed his Beatitudes is not to be just something for itself. It has the vocation both to preserve (salt) and to model (light) something for the rest of the world... It is the compassionate and the merciful who make the world safe for humanity”*, helping to lift the burdens of others, as, for example, we’ve seen in the recent coming together of so many in the broader community, to help those suffering from the aftermath of the devastation of the bushfires, and I include our parish contribution (*near \$7,000!*) as part of that too. Thanks again for your generosity there.

john hannon

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