

**Fourth Sunday before Lent 2017**

**1 Corinthians 2: 1 – 12; Matthew 5: 13 – 20**

This morning I offer to you two pairs of words: pure and impure; and visible and invisible. You can see where they come from. They're derived from the first part of the Gospel reading. Jesus says we are to be the salt of the earth, salt that hasn't lost its tastiness. In other words we are to be salt that is still pure enough to be tasty and hasn't become so impure by contamination that you can't taste it. It's still got to be sufficiently distinctive (pure) to be salt, otherwise it serves no purpose. And Jesus says that we are to be light, visible like a light on a hill top or on a lamp stand.

So we have two pairs of words. And each pair operates in the same way. Each is a pair of opposites. We have a positive and a negative in each pair. Each time we take the positive word and we add a prefix which turns it into the negative. We tack *im* onto the front of pure

to make it impure; and we tack *in* onto the front of visible to make it invisible. And what Jesus wants, in each case, is for us to be the positive words without the prefixes that make them negative. We are to be salt; we are to be light. We are to be pure; we are to be visible.

It's simple – so far - except there is a conflict between the two pairs. Being pure and being visible, at the same time isn't easy. The simplest way to stay pure is to shut ourselves away from all contaminating influences. But if we do that, we won't be visible. Similarly, the simplest way to be visible is to stick our heads above the parapet. But if we do that, we make ourselves vulnerable to attack, attack from corrupting influences.

That is why Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. Now let's just get over, for the moment, this idea that scribes and Pharisees are like biblical pantomime baddies at

whom we hiss and boo whenever they come on stage. They were the custodians of a faith and a culture that went back more than 2000 years; and they had to maintain the integrity of that faith and culture in the face of military occupation and religious persecution. And I take my hat off to way they did that. If they hadn't been so faithful, if they hadn't been so orthodox, there would have been no Jewish tradition for Jesus to have been born into. And, of course, in some ways they were visible: they would look distinctive. No doubt if we'd walked down a Jerusalem street we would have been able to spot who were the scribes and the Pharisees. They would have had phylacteries strapped to their foreheads and prayer shawls wrapped round them and hanging from their waists, just as today some Christians have distinctive car stickers and lapel badges.

But the problem is that all that commendable success, all that purity, was achieved at the expense of not bringing any effective light to shine on the

circumstances in which they lived. Their integrity and orthodoxy was maintained at the expense of offering neither critique of, nor influence upon, their society. They had come to an accommodation with the Romans whereby they got on with maintaining their religion and the Romans got on with maintaining civil infrastructure.

Being Christians whose righteousness exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees involves us in taking risks with our discipleship. If we think of our discipleship in terms of coming to church, reading the Bible, going to Bible study groups, praying, having fellowship with other Christians, being part of church groups; perhaps even in terms of being effective in bringing others to a life of worship and prayer and Bible study and fellowship – all important things; all things without which we can't really suggest that we are taking seriously the claim that Jesus makes on our lives – but if we think of our discipleship simply in those terms, we run the risk of being pure without shedding any

light; and therefore of being no more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees.

We address that risk by ensuring that we think of our discipleship in terms of being people who go, people who get out there, people who are propelled from worship to get on with it, living and working, and all to his praise and glory; people who are sent out in the power of his spirit to be parents and grandparents, ethical shoppers, just employers, thoughtful voters, supporters of a free press and other media, opponents of misogyny and racism and homophobia; people who volunteer and shape and influence and create an open and tolerant society; people whose words and actions, whose working practices and political commitments combat poverty and loneliness, and rejection and fear.

But, of course, as soon as we start doing those things we run the risk of being no more than glorified social workers or political agitators. We run the risk that we buy influence at the risk of distinctiveness. We run the

risk that we become indistinguishable from the very system that we are trying to influence and hold to account. And of course, we run the risk of forgetting to pray and read the Bible and being built up in the power of the Spirit by having fellowship with one another.

We cannot be mature, responsible, effective disciples of Christ unless we accept these risks and try to manage them. We are helped to strike the balance by attending to the middle part of the Bible reading that we haven't yet looked at. Jesus said he had come to fulfil the law. In some ways it's one of the most difficult ideas in the Bible to interpret. But if we simply remember that the law is summarised as loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength; and loving your neighbour as yourself, we come to the conclusion that following Jesus is simply all about love. We square the circle if we ensure that all that we do, we do with love, for then we shall have what Paul in the 1

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Corinthians calls the Spirit of God rather than the Spirit of the world and engaging with life as Jesus would have us.

Amen.