

The Life of Jesus
Sermon 6: Teaching on the Mountain
“Do you know who you are?”

Passages: Eph. 2:19-22
 Matthew 5:13-16

Amnesia must be a terrible thing! Can you imagine waking up from a car crash or a skiing accident to the shocking discovery that everyone around you is a stranger? The people who are say they are your wife or husband, your children, your mother and father, your dearest friends...are all unknown to you! And worse than that, when you look at yourself in the mirror, you don't even know who you are???

In a sense, ancient Israel had amnesia. She forgot who she was called to be!

After all, ever since the day when Abraham was first chosen by God to cross the desert and enter into the Promised Land of Canaan, God was intentionally creating a 'special people', a people who would be different to the rest of the world. They would be God's agents of goodness and mercy, of love and generosity. This people were called to have a **positive influence** on the world, drawing the world back into God's arms.

The key words here are **positive influence**. And there were two key Old Testament metaphors that described the **positive influence** that Israel was meant to have on others. Israel was called to be '**salt**' and '**light**'!

Now, **salt** was regularly mentioned in connection with Israel's worship. Whenever someone offered a grain offering, it had to be "seasoned with salt". Salt was also added to the burnt offering. Salt was a key ingredient in making incense. If you established a 'covenant of friendship' with a foreigner, salt was again used. Newborn babies were rubbed with salt. And when the Temple in Jerusalem was built under Solomon, salt became a regular part of the offerings. Salt was everywhere! Why? Because salt affects positive change! It adds flavour, preserves, sanitises, and purifies.

And so, every time God gathered with His people in worship, He made sure salt was there, as a symbol of what Israel was meant to be! In other words, He was calling them to be *like salt*—to have a **positive influence** on the world!

The same thing can be said about **light**. When God create the world, He caused His light to shine into the darkness. The first thing we can say about light, therefore, is that it actively dispels the darkness. **Second, light makes life possible**. Light is essential to biological life; photosynthesis is absolutely

necessary for life to thrive and flourish and prosper. Third, **light gives order and intelligibility to creation**. Light enables vision, sight, knowledge and wisdom. **Finally, light** is a metaphor for God's word. God's Word illuminates and makes known. This concept is developed especially in Psalms as God's Word is described as ***"a light to our feet and a lamp to our path"***.

Light, in other words, has a **positive influence**! And, once again, God called His people, Israel, to be *'light' in the darkness*. They were called to have a **positive influence** on the world!

But, as I said earlier, Israel had amnesia! Although God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, she had forgotten who she was called to be! Instead, she was behaving like everyone else; caught up in the confusion of power politics, factional squabbles and militant revolutions. She had, thus, lost her distinctive taste and become enveloped in darkness. Indeed, whereas Jerusalem, the ***"city set on a hill"***, was supposed to be a beacon of hope to the world..., it was now repulsing those who came genuinely seeking God with her legalism and factional in-fighting.

With all this in mind, let's go back to Jesus...back to where we left Him last week, sitting on the mountainside with a motley collection of new disciples at his feet. You see, His *Sermon on the Mount* was, to put it quite simply, *a call to Israel to wake up and be healed of her amnesia*! Jesus came to remind this ancient nation of who she was meant to be under God.

And that's why, as we saw last week, the first thing Jesus did was to remind them that they were *"blessed"*. Why? Because, despite being crushed and battered; despite being humble and uneducated state (they were Galileans, remember!), **God had now come to be with them in person!** His Kingdom of Heaven was now at hand! Jesus was rebuilding a New Temple and a New Israel from the rejected masses who were now sitting at His feet. ***"Blessed are you!"***

But Jesus doesn't stop His sermon there! The very next thing that Jesus does is *to declare, over them, the very identity that was originally reserved for the entire nation of Israel*. It was if Jesus was saying to the fishermen and blue-collar workers of Israel gathered at His feet, ***"Let me tell you who you are! You are blessed by God! You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!"***

But, tell me, what makes them salt and light? Has Jesus chosen them because He already sees all these wonderful metaphorical qualities in them? Has He already recognised them as positive influencers in their families and communities? Probably not! In fact, the probability is that, since their

ancestors failed at being the *salt of the earth* and the *light of the world*, these new recruits have little chance of doing any better!

Except for one, new fact-- **the presence of Jesus.**

You see, this is the reason why Old Testament Israel failed to be salt and light-- they simply failed to keep the Lord in the centre of all they did. As they lost intimate communion with the God who is *salt* and *light*, Israel increasingly lost her own ability to positively influence the world. She was no longer what she had been created to be! God's glory had departed ("Ichabod").

That's why Jesus starts over again, with this new bunch of recruits. It's not that they have anything inherently positive in them. It's not that they can do better than ancient Israel before them. But as He pronounces this reality over them, His very presence begins to influence their identity. Because he is the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World, so will they be. And if they continue to Keep Him in the centre of their lives, basking in the intimacy of a personal relationship with Jesus, this reality will only increase!

And of course, it's the same truth for us, two thousand years later! As He did with those first disciples, Jesus declares over us: "***You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.***" But, remember the one condition: Jesus must be in *the centre* of all we do and say!

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that, as a church, our worship must remain central to our identity. So, too, must our corporate prayers and the hearing of God's Word read and preached. Jesus stands in our midst by His Word declared over us! His presence causes us to be salt and light!

The same is true for us as individuals. If you let your day be filled with prayer and are aware of Jesus as the day progresses, you will be salt and light. If you let your day be punctuated by songs, and hymns and spiritual songs, and keep the worship of Jesus flowing into all areas of life, you will be salt and light. If you allow Jesus to interject thoughts and words and pictures into your conscious mind, and let Him speak to you and guide you through the day's circumstances, you will be salt and light. For only then, when something unusual happens, He will help to make sense of it. If you get into a conversation with someone, He will give you the right words to say to encourage and build that person up, or to speak prophetically into their life.

That's what it means to keep Jesus in the centre of your life. It basically means having a subtle yet confident awareness of His glorious presence all around you. *It means allowing His Spirit to keep us from getting **amnesia!***

Otherwise, the salt in us (His salt) will lose its saltiness...and the light in us (His light) will be smothered by the darkness of outside forces. Without Jesus at the centre of our lives, you and I have no hope of having a **positive influence** on the world.

Do you know who you are? ***"You are the salt of the earth!" "You are the light of the world!"***

Let's pray!