



Light of the World

Matthew 5:13–20

*For I tell you that unless your
righteousness surpasses that of the
Pharisees and the teachers of the law,
you will certainly not enter the kingdom
of heaven.*

February 5, 2017

Thoughts for the Week

Scriptures: Isaiah 58: 7-10 • 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5 • Matthew 5: 13-16

I have known people throughout my life that have been firm believers in subscriptions to various newspapers from outside their present living area. Some of the papers that they were interested in were: The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun Times, and even the Wall Street Journal. Added to that they would often subscribe to various magazines and periodicals such as Time Magazine, Life Magazine, US News and World Report, etc. and of course their local paper (Detroit News or Detroit Free Press). All of those print editions, pretty well take care of the secular news coming in from around the world. Of course, many of the people now have computers, so they probably check the major networks for the latest news as well.

All that leads me to believe that most people, at least those of my acquaintance, have a serious interest in what is happening in our world. Moreover, most Christians are also interested in knowing how religion and faith impact world events or how secular events influence our faith. It seems clear that most of us strive to live in two worlds, the secular and the sacred, because both are closely related to each other, or should be.

All that became clear to me when I read the scriptures, especially the gospel, for this Sunday. At first glance when reading Jesus words as he spoke to the people of his time, we may have the sense that he was mainly concerned with matters of religion, faith or eternal salvation, but in this passage we hear him say something rather different: "You are the salt of the earth," he says, "you are the light of the world your light must shine before others so that they may see the goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father." Notice that Jesus uses the words earth and world, not church, temple or synagogue. In other words Jesus seems to be telling us that our task as Christians is to be concerned about affairs in the world around us. That, after all, is where life mostly happens. To the extent that a person becomes involved in ordinary worldly events, to that degree can such a person also be identified as a Christian? Faith and life, the secular and the sacred, intersect each other in the course of our daily life, or at least they should.

It would seem to me that even the most religious of people who live a somewhat sheltered life ought to be interested in reading the daily newspaper or watching the evening news. Otherwise how can they pray for the healing of the violent events going on in the world around them? In short, people do not simply live their faith inside their churches, temples or synagogues. We are citizens of an earthly kingdom and of a heavenly kingdom as well. Faith and culture intersect each other.

I think it should become pretty clear to us how we can live in two worlds at the same time; the life going on in the world each day makes that clear to us. The prophet Isaiah gives us some rather clear examples that can fit any age and time: "Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked when you see them. Then your light

shall break forth like the sun at dawn."

Finally, it is encouraging for Christians to not hide behind pious curtains but to venture out into the world around us where we will find Christ among those who are most abandoned. It is incumbent upon us to venture forth to a homeless shelter in the city, greet the people warmly and make some of our resources available to them. Obviously, if so many other people can find the time to leave the sheltered confines of their homes, all of us should surely be able to find some time to leave our sheltered churches, our homes, our treasured newspapers and find Christ among those who long to see what Christ truly looks like.

Jesus Reveals Himself as the Light of the World

Jesus has dramatically called people to come to him for God's living water and now he *again* refers to himself in a most startling way, saying, *I am the light of the world*. This claim, like the claim to give living water, also corresponds to events at this feast - the Feast of Tabernacles was an annual Jewish feast held six months after the Feast of the Passover. It lasted eight days and commemorated the Lord's blessings to the children of Israel during their travels in the wilderness. It also celebrated the year's harvest and marked the end of the harvest season. The Jews considered this feast the greatest and most joyful of all their feasts. A lamp-lighting ceremony took place in the temple every evening of the feast, during which large lamps were set up in the Court of Women. The lamps' light, it was said, filled every courtyard in the city. In the light of these lamps there was great singing and dancing all evening in celebration of God's salvation, especially his deliverance at the exodus as he led his people with his presence in a pillar of fire by night. In the sight of these great lamps in the Court of Women, perhaps even in the evening while they blazed, Jesus proclaims himself to be the light of the world.

The Pharisees do not yet realize the enormity of Jesus' claims regarding himself, so they do not respond with a charge of blasphemy. Instead, they challenge the form his self-proclamation takes, charging him with bearing witness to himself and therefore lacking sufficient witnesses. The need for two or three witnesses is laid down in the law (Deut. 19:15), and the later tradition, reflected here, said, "None may be believed when he testifies of himself"

Jesus brings up the need for two witnesses in order, it seems, to bring home the point that when he bears witness his is not the witness of a single person but of two persons, himself and his Father. Since the two witnesses required by the law do not include the accused this would not be a valid legal argument. So Jesus seems to use the law in a non-legal way to bear witness to his relationship with the Father. The Father is known as the one *who sent me*; in other words, Jesus is identified by his relationship to the Father, and the Father, likewise, is known by his relationship to Jesus.

When the Pharisees ask, "*Where is your father?*" they reveal that they do not realize Jesus is talking about God. It is as if they want to locate this Father so they can interrogate him. It would not do them much good, since those who are not open to God cannot hear him even when he speaks directly to them. They do not realize that in Jesus they are seeing the clearest revelation of the Father himself: *If you knew me, you would know my Father also*. To know Jesus is to know God--such is the core proclamation of this Gospel. Their question points up once again their alienation from God. Jesus' revelation of himself as the light of the world and this ensuing discussion takes place in the temple *near the place where the offerings were put*, which is, most likely, in the Court of Women. In the temple, Jesus has revealed himself, as the fulfillment of what the temple itself was about--the presence of God on earth.