

Introducing the Sermon on the Mount

June 7th 2022

Between today and June 23rd we will be hearing the Sermon on the Mount at the weekday Mass. Before we consider today's reading with the famous words about salt and light I want to give you something of the context of the times and the setting of the Sermon.

The Jews in Jesus' day were living in hard times. They were facing a national crisis. Roman rulers controlled their land, took their money, and raped their women. Many of the Jewish priests and local leaders were assassinated and replaced by handpicked appointments from Rome or Herod. Thousands of Jews who tried to resist Roman rule quickly paid the severe price of death, often by crucifixion.

This oppressive environment created numerous challenges for those who were striving to remain loyal to God's covenant. According to the Torah, God alone was king and He would rule His people through a descendant of King David. No foreigner was to rule over the Jews as Deuteronomy 17:15 explicitly states:

you may indeed set as king over you him whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.

So what was a good Jew to do? Was it okay to go along with the Roman authorities, or would submitting to Caesar, Pilate, and Herod betray Yahweh's lordship? This is where Jesus' came onto the scene and answered this question in the most unsuspected way. He attracted this very large following and decided to lead the crowds up a mountain in Galilee for a special discourse about the kingdom. This action itself could have led some of His followers to ponder what might happen next. In those days, the hill country of Galilee was a refuge for Jewish revolutionaries who were plotting their assaults against foreign oppressors. The caves in those hills made for good hiding places. Not too long before this, a group of bandits had hidden in the Galilean hills during a fierce conflict with King Herod.

So when Jesus led His followers up a mountain in Galilee, perhaps a few may have been wondering whether He was going to start some type of revolt of His own—like Judas the Galilean had done in the Galilean hillside one generation earlier. Was Jesus going to make a claim to be Israel's king and lead the people in a fight for the kingdom? The crowd waited for Him to speak.

Jesus then began to address His band of followers on the mountainside with a startling message. He introduced an unexpected lineup of people who would be blessed in the kingdom He was building: "Blessed are the merciful . . . Blessed are the peacemakers . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted"

What a shock. What kind of kingdom movement was this? Jesus seemed to be blessing all the wrong people. The peacemakers, the merciful, and the persecuted were not the expected first-

round draft choices for a kingdom-building team. Many would have preferred vengeance over mercy, vindication over persecution, and fighting for freedom over making peace.¹

And then they heard this words, “you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world”. Those who were going to follow Jesus as disciples were not to conform to the degrading speech and violent actions so common at that time.

When we think of discipleship being equated with salt these two verses from elsewhere in the Bible come to mind. In Mark 9 we read:

Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”²

In Colossians 4:6 we read:

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt,³

Being light of the world is associated with this this famous verse in John 8:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”⁴

As we work our way through the Sermon over these next two weeks, keep these images in mind. For Jesus was teaching that in a world of careless speech and violence, as evidenced on Sunday by the terrible massacre at the Nigerian Church, we are called to be a certain kind of people whose words bring out the best in others, like salt bringing out the best flavours, and who actions give light. All of this is because we are to be a city set on a hill, an outpost of heaven. We are not to imitate the cities of the world but that city seen in Revelation 21:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband⁵

The Sermon will help us to understand and put into practice bringing this city to earth and particularly into this part of Calgary’s northwest.

¹ <https://stpaulcenter.com/the-radical-call-of-the-sermon-on-the-mount/>

² [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mk 9:50). (2006). Ignatius Press.

³ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Col 4:6). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Jn 8:12). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁵ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Re 21:2). (2006). Ignatius Press.