

Epiphany 5: Feb. 9, 2014  
Matt. 5:13-20, Isaiah 58:1-12

Over and over again, on our recent visit to the Holy Land, we encountered the Israeli sense of entitlement to the land to the exclusion of other people who live there, or lived there in the past. Behind this entitlement claim rests a belief that Israel – that is, Israel, the people– are God’s chosen people, and that God gave them this land many thousands of years ago in the covenant with Abraham. I do not plan to give a homily about the politics of present day Israel, or ‘occupied Palestine’ as some would call the land. But I do ask you to hear today’s readings in this larger context: what are God’s chosen people chosen for? What are they chosen to do? What is the covenant with God?

Today’s Old Testament reading is that portion of Isaiah we call ‘Third Isaiah,’ and dates to early in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, more than two hundred years *after* the ministry of the original Isaiah of Jerusalem. A lot happened in those two hundred years between first and third Isaiah: the people we call Israel saw their Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, suffered through the Babylonian exile and now, having returned from exile, find the Jerusalem, the Judea of the past, not yet restored. If they are God’s chosen people and this is their land, why is this so?

The prophet 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah chastises the people, who have apparently reverted to old forms of false worship. Isaiah says, God expects more of his covenantal people than mere fasting in the name of righteousness. Fasting is not a holy act, when done in name only. Light and healing will not come until Israel ‘looses the bonds of injustice...shares their bread with the hungry...brings the homeless poor into their houses...satisfies the needs of the afflicted.’ Only then will ‘the ancient ruins be rebuilt,’ says the prophet.

Five hundred years later, the Jerusalem, the Judea, through which Jesus walked was under Roman rule. The Temple was rebuilt, but the people Israel lived in subjugation to the Empire. Once again, false worship crept into the temple practices, the rules of the Pharisees and scribes.

Jesus and his disciples gathered on the Mount of Beatitudes. Today, more than two thousand years later, the crest of the Mount of Beatitudes is still a beautiful, idyllic setting. The Sea of Galilee spreads across the horizon, beyond groves of olive trees. I imagine Jesus looking out at the light playing over the water, as he began to speak of his ministry and intent. We know this discourse as the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Beatitudes.

There are as yet only four disciples – together they represent all disciples to come. The mountaintop setting recalls Mt. Sinai, and Moses’ revelation there. Isaiah’s description of a restored Jerusalem seems to echo in Jesus’ words as he offers his vision of God’s kingdom: a community of justice, transformed social relationships, shared and accessible resources.

In today’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about discipleship as the broader

role of the covenantal people— what God’s ‘chosen’ people are chosen to be and do. Be salt and light, Jesus says. Be salt and light.

I used to think that the expression ‘salt of the earth’ conveyed something akin to ‘life of the party’ – someone special, engaging. But Jesus is speaking of much more. In Judaism, salt was a symbol of covenant, remaining faithful. Salt is essential to life, life-giving.

At the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, Simeon recognizes Jesus as ‘A light to enlighten the nations.’ Simeon’s words echo the metaphor of Isaiah (42:6), describing the people Israel – you are called to be ‘the light of the world’.

Be salt and light, Jesus says. Be salt and light.

Jesus calls us to *model* God’s covenantal ways, not merely reflect old traditions, values and behaviors. To fulfill the law and the prophets is to bring their *purposes* to expression in everyday life. To *live* the commandments, not merely obey them. Isaiah challenges Israel to be Israel, so Jesus challenges the disciples to *be* disciples: to be righteous in *living*, in *relationship* with God – and not to be like the Pharisees and scribes who equate being righteous with the mere observance of the law and tradition, and public displays of piety.

Like most pilgrims to the Holy Land, we walked the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross, in Jerusalem. There are 14 stations - each site is a revered spot over which a particular Christian denomination maintains a commemorative shrine or church. Traveling from station to station, we walked through the market place, a winding warren of narrow alleys paved with uneven large stones, encountering unexpected steps, always heading up or down hill and never level. It teemed with people speaking different languages, storekeepers hawking their goods, hand drawn carts pushing through. Keeping up with our group was a challenge. We were told to walk single file – like small children holding the belt of the child in front.

We stopped to pray at each station, using a traditional Way of the Cross liturgy – yet with all the jostling and noise, I found it difficult to feel holiness, to be present in any way other than purely physical. One of our group put his ipod earphones in place and listened to music to drown out the clamor of the crowds.

The final station is the cave where Jesus was laid and from which he rose – over the cave is the Holy Sepulchre Church. A shelter was built in 326 by Helen, the Emperor Constantine’s mother; a far grander church structure was built by the Crusaders somewhere around 1000 A.D.. A thousand years later, the site is maintained by the Brotherhood of the Armenian/Greek Orthodox Church. The interior of the Holy Sepulchre Church is breathtaking in the Greek Orthodox way of decorative lights, lanterns, golden chandeliers, icons. In one place, you can peer through the boards of the present floor and see the mosaic floor of the old Crusader church below.

After a significant wait amidst hundreds of other pilgrims, our group of 34 was permitted to

descend to the level of the cave. Down flights of worn, dark steps, we were shepherded into another crowd of people. Periodically, someone would push through to the front of the line – no apologies, some harsh words – a disciple? No, a ‘pilgrim’ in a hurry to proclaim their presence. No place to sit or even lean. The cave itself is surrounded by an exterior metal structure with a gutter at waist level – pilgrims can place a burning candle in the gutter. But, it’s a struggle to move far enough away from the person next to you to get a candle out of your bag or pocket, and then thread your way across the 10 abreast line.

Periodically, the Orthodox Brothers walked around the cave and the assembled crowd, ringing bells and swinging smoking censers, adding an overpowering incense to the swell of humanity. Someone in our group began to sing, and soon we were all singing hymns of praise, our voices inviting God’s glory to light the darkened space, which until then felt anything but holy.

As we approached the cave entrance, the Brother in charge sonorously announced, ‘no singing, no singing.’ We became silent, surprised to find more than twenty minutes had passed in our music meditation. Only three or four can enter the cave at once, you have to duck your head to go in – every few minutes the Brother leaned into the entry and called loudly to the people inside, ‘come out, come out.’ I thought of Jesus calling to Lazarus, as one by one the pilgrims emerged.

Finally, it was my turn. I barely had time to take in the surroundings before I heard, ‘come out, come out.’ I emerged, thinking of the prayer from the Easter Vigil:

Through the Pascal mystery...we are buried with Christ by baptism into his death and raised with him to newness of life.

We each had a bundle of candles given to us at the start of the Way. Some of us lit candles at various stations; the intent was to light what remained of our bundle as we left the Holy Sepulcher. There was yet another crowded line. Only two at a time could get to the six foot burning candle to light their bundles. The Brother urged us to ‘hurry, hurry’ – as soon as you lit your candle bundle, you were expected to extinguish it in the large brass snuffer overhead.

The light of Christ?

I tell this story to help us think about public displays of piety, mere observance of tradition, hollow righteousness – the false piety of the Israelites returned from exile, the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus’ time. Modern day pilgrims reverencing a holy spot of historical significance – but not, in their hearts, disciples.

What is the authentic practice of our faith? Salt and light. Salt: a distinctive capacity to elicit goodness, to give an edge to what is otherwise bland and unremarkable. Light: a willingness to go where darkness exists, to draw people out with warmth and radiance, to show light in a dark and broken world. The spontaneous singing turned the ordinary into something holy, the echo

of Scripture in my heart turned the exhortations of the Brother into sacred moments.

As I extinguished my candle bundle, the Holy Spirit reminded me of the *lighting* of the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil, and the prayer...”*may [we] attain to the festival of everlasting light, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

My Holy Land pilgrimage was not so much about being there, as about what happened when I was there. Coming to the Table to share the Eucharist is about what happens within you and the community, not the externals of your participation. That’s Isaiah’s text today: it’s not about fasting, but about what happens when you fast. You can’t fast as a religious act of obedience while fighting, quarreling and denying justice to others, says Isaiah. 58:3-4

That’s where the texts from Isaiah and Matthew hit home for me. The turbulent Jerusalem of today is a far cry from Isaiah’s vision, or Jesus vision of the Kingdom fulfilled. We are called to enact God’s compassion.

*(Relight the bundle of candles from the Via Dolorosa)*

We define ourselves as disciples when we *embody* the light, when we offer witness to the love of God through our lives. When we move towards reconciliation, mercy and justice. When we are peacemakers. When we are open to the Holy Spirit. When we are receptive to the light of God.

The light of God is like this candle: the world is full of God’s light, but we must be open to receive the light. Only the light that flows *into* us will shine through us.

We extinguish the candle, God’s light continues to shine through us. *(Extinguish candle bundle)*

Eugene Peterson in *the Message* translates Matthew 5:14-15 this way:

Be the light....God is not a secret to be kept.... Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God.

Be generous with your lives. Be salt and light!

*Amen*

(recessing after the Eucharist to *This Little Light of Mine*, distribute candles from the pilgrim bundle.)

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