

## **Matthew 5:13-16 Our Calling to Ministry**

### **Introduction**

On 25 March 1965 Martin Luther King addressed a large crowd in the centre of Montgomery, Alabama, at the end of a five day walk from the town of Selma to the State capital Montgomery in support of the right of African-American citizens, over the simple issue of the right to exercise their legal right to register as voters on the electoral roll in the State of Alabama. The constitution of the United States of America gave permission for all American citizens of whatever background the right to participate in the democratic process, but a significant minority of white racists who held power prevented roughly half the population from exercising their democratic rights. It was such a simple and clear matter that looking back it is truly embarrassing that in an apparently civilised nation only half a century ago some brave men and women had to lay down their lives for the right to walk the streets of their native land and to exercise their right as citizens to participate in the democratic process. It is so easy to curse the darkness there is plenty of it around. But at that time and in that place some brave individuals in a non-violent and peaceful manner determined that they would shine a light in a dark corner of that land and allow the nation as a whole to come to a judgement about what was going on. A light was shining in the darkness until the victory was won. We come forward to our world and our land half a century later and ask the same question –is there darkness in our world today? Are there places where evil men hold sway? We can only sadly say ‘Yes’ to such questions. Are there challenges to biblical Gospel principles in our own land? ‘Yes’ - once again there is work to be done. Yet in words quoted by our Queen Elizabeth II in her Christmas message on Christmas Day 2015 we remember this: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:5). A little candle produces light it doesn’t have to be a large one. A little candle doing what it is supposed to do is sufficient to vanquish darkness. Never underestimate what your witness and mine can accomplish this coming year. The darkness and evil in our world will present a constant challenge, but that has always been the case and will be until Jesus returns. Our calling is to discern the challenges we need to address at this time and take our stand for the Lord. Don’t ever assume that ‘someone else’ will do the hard work of taking a stand it will always be a minority willing to be brave enough to make a difference. In 1971 in the face of an ever increasing tide of immoral material being promoted on the TV and in sections of the entertainment media generally, a small number of Christians took a stand and the Festival of Light campaign flourished that year culminating in a rally on 25 September 1971 in Trafalgar Square in London when an estimated 400,000 people gathered, two-thirds aged under twenty-five to raise their voices. What kind of things were they objecting to? The toleration of sexually predatory attitudes towards young people in the BBC and the entertainment industry in general; together with the increasing acceptance of the voice of the Paedophile Exchange calling for the normalisation of their preferences in society with prominent voices of support from influential individuals in the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCCL). In 2014 Shami Chakrabarti, Liberty’s director, issued a public apology, saying it was “a source of continuing disgust and horror that even the NCCCL had to expel paedophiles from its ranks in 1983 after infiltration at some point in the Seventies” [Daily Telegraph, 24 February 2014]. History will view Mary Whitehouse, Malcolm Muggeridge and their colleagues much more favourably in the longer-term than in their lifetimes. Yet our calling is to seize the opportunities to express a positive

alternative way of living as, for example, Romance Academy has done so well in Sex and Relationships Education in schools and youth clubs in different parts of the UK. What is our calling? Jesus expressed it very clearly in Matthew 5:13-16: *You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*<sup>14</sup> *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* The beatitudes of Jesus recorded in the earlier verses of this chapter addressed our essential character – what followers of Jesus ought to be like in the inner person. It was declaring that the kind of person I need to be is first and foremost in importance way ahead of how I ought to behave. Naturally if we are right on the inside then it ought to follow that our conduct is in line with our creed; that our beliefs and our behaviour are consistent one with the other. In a world in which many people live their lives without reference to what God thinks of their lifestyle, given that we will rub shoulders with them on a regular basis it is an absolute priority to keep our hearts focussed on the things that God sees as important in order that we may be an influence for good in society, rather than Christians being negatively influenced to water down or ignore God's standards. If 10% of the population of a country are passionately committed to a set of values they can come very close to persuading the nation to follow their beliefs –the tragedy of much that passes for Christianity in the last few decades is that it is so similar to the secular worldly values around us that it is of little impact on a needy world – similar to tasteless salt and an exceedingly dim light. Jesus did not call his people to live in a closed monastic community, rather to be the means by which the wider society is preserved and transformed.

### **1. The Salt of the Earth** (Matthew 5:13)

*13 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*

(a)**The Need for Purpose** Why am I here? Peter in I Peter 2:9 wrote: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.* What does this mean for us today? It means that if Jesus thought a handful of Galilean fishermen and their colleagues could exercise these qualities and make a difference in their day then how much more He can expect contemporary Christians to take a stand for the integrity of our character in the workplace as well as in church and our homes; to speak up for the voiceless and marginalised whether it is on the streets of our cities or in camps for asylum seekers or wherever exploitation and injustice is to be found. It will manifest itself in numerous different ways as the great nineteenth century Christian social reformers demonstrated. However, at the centre motivating all forms of ministry and mission is a love for the One who first loved us and sent His Son to save us. The desire that other people come to know and love Him too is foundational as social reforms without salvation will only be a temporary 'cure' of someone's problems. Our calling in essence is invite others to join us in following Jesus not only in the convictions we believe, but in the lifestyles we lead, albeit imperfectly; the Christian uniquely has a God-given purpose for our lives because we remember the words of Jesus to a Jewish religious leader in Luke 10:27: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself."* The challenge, personally, is working out in

what particular ways we can make a difference in this New Year to come. It is not always about starting something new when the diary may already be full to bursting with activities; it might be finding a way to do something good in an ever better and more effective way. For someone else it might be guarding time for personal devotions or prayer that we had neglected or for someone else it might be planning to ensure we make time for Sunday worship more regularly or getting involved in house-group. The temptation for Evangelical Christians historically is often 'to do something more' without remembering we need to have some time to sleep! This time of year is ideal to stop and think about what God has in store for us in 2016. We are particularly seeking the Lord at this time as we have taken the decision to extend the premises at Panmurefield. We need to pray and reflect on what God might be saying to us for His work there, as well as in St Vincent Street, over the next five to ten years.

(b) **The Significance of Salt** The fishermen to whom Jesus first spoke these words covered the fish they caught with liberal quantities of salt in order to preserve it, otherwise it would have been unfit to eat long before the majority of it had got to market. Even in our modern world where refrigeration and the use of preservatives reduces the need for salt –certain foodstuffs still taste less edible without an appropriate injection of salt into the cooking process. It is interesting that in Leviticus 2:13 worshippers in the Old Testament sacrificial system were urged to: *Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of the Lord your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.* Salt was seen as the agent of purification and therefore an essential ingredient. Prevention rather than cure is the right way to go in medical practice also and morally so too in standards and values. God has placed each of us in families, social groups; amongst neighbours and work colleagues to have a positive influence for good. The world may be getting worse and the more so as we approach the return of Christ- but it is our duty to prevent decay where that is possible not only with our dental hygiene, but amongst the people God has given us the privilege of associating week by week. Every one can make a difference so often ordinary people can do amazing things. For example, Quaker Elizabeth Fry in prison reform; Baptist William Quarrier in the care of Orphan and Street children in Scotland, together with pioneering medical care for Tuberculosis and Epilepsy sufferers; Mary Seacole and later Frances Nightingale in Nursing care; William Wilberforce and his friends over so many social issues in addition to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire; Joseph Livesey, Baptist Minister in Preston and William Collins, printer and publisher in Glasgow, amongst the temperance pioneers overcoming the power of the drink barons; these and many more people said enough is enough and took a stand against social evils. There will be times when you and I need to take a stand on something; at the time it may be apparently so small but remember Rosa Louise McCauley Parks (1913–2005) an African American seamstress and civil rights activist whom the U.S. Congress dubbed the "Mother of the Modern-Day Movement". Parks is famous for her refusal on 1 December 1955 to obey bus driver James Blake's demand that she relinquish her seat to a white passenger. Her subsequent arrest and trial for this act of civil disobedience triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the largest and most successful mass movements against racial segregation in history, and launched Martin Luther King Jr., one of the organizers of the boycott, to the forefront of the civil rights movement. It takes that first person to stand; many others will follow in due course when the cause is right.

(c) **The Problem for Salt** (Matthew 5:13) *...But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled*

by men. Strictly-speaking salt cannot lose its saltiness as sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound capable of resisting almost all chemical attacks upon it; however, it is vulnerable to impurities undermining its strength. At the Dead Sea salt is dissolved in copious quantities such that when the water around the edge of the sea evaporates significant quantities of white powder is deposited on the shore, but it is tasteless and useless of no value whatsoever. Jesus warned His followers that we can be like that –if we allow impurities to invade our lives and dilute our witness. What kind of impurities can undermine our witness? (i) **Fear of other people** In John 19:38 there is a reference to Joseph of Arimathea as *a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews* –that is Jewish religious authorities in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council. He was afraid of losing his prominent position in the nation. There are times when God calls us to speak for Him – will you /will I speak out? Lord Acton famously said: “In order for evil men to triumph it is only required that good men do nothing.” It is rarely a speech that is required - a few words or a sentence may be the most that is called for. (ii) **Indifference** not spoken but observed by actions not done; People face an eternity in hell unless we are willing to tell them of Jesus –and how many of us have failed to take opportunities for witness; we have the greatest message in the world, yet keep it to ourselves. If our neighbours’ home was on fire would we having observed it debate within ourselves whether it was merely our point of view or whether they might be offended if we raise it with them? Or would we bang on their door until they responded and observed what we had seen. There are of course many ways and means of sharing our faith. It may take much prayer and years of faithful loving witness before we have an opportunity to speak to someone about our faith, but may we pray with expectancy of God at work in people’s lives; what is exciting as we have observed over the last year is that as we stepped forward in mission and took faith-risks we have seen God working in people’s lives. What is important is that we seek His wisdom to know when to speak or say more and when to stay silent; it is sometimes very hard to call. What God desires of His people is a sense of expectancy of Him working in people’s lives and us living in accordance with our expectations of God at work. (iii) **Compromise** *Lot in Sodom* (Genesis 19) Just mixing with people who don’t know Jesus isn’t automatically evangelism, it may be better than some Christians who self-consciously avoid contact with people outside the faith as much as possible which is sad, but if we simply adopt the values and morals of the secular world around us it will have no effect whatsoever. The Ten Commandments haven’t changed: Putting God first in everything; not taking God’s name in vain; observing the God’s day; honouring parents; avoiding murder, sexual immorality, theft, false witness and coveting. These standards will have a major impact on our lives – respecting God’s name may mean challenging blasphemous speech or switching off the TV or walking out of the cinema or theatre; observing God’s day will have an impact on which days in the week we require other people to serve us and ensure we take some time off in the week; honouring parents will affect our time and other priorities while they are alive; avoiding murder is not simply being civil with your neighbours when they make too much noise! it is a declaration that life is sacred from the youngest baby in the womb to the oldest member of our families; the legal and ethical implications of this are vast to ensure each is respected and cared for as they deserve. Addressing the challenges of sexual immorality is a much more complex issue; simply saying no to a variety of lifestyles is not enough; finding means of prevention wherever possible is wise, but that can be costly, as is walking with someone as we help them change a way of living. Respecting other people’s possessions and integrity in our words and actions, for example helps us address

issues of false witness and covetousness; often there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. However, living a life that honours God with integrity will be noticed.

## **2. The Light of the World** (Matthew 5:14-16)

(a) **The Example of Jesus** *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house* (Matthew 5:14-15). Isaiah 49:6 stated: *I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles that You shall be My salvation to the ends of the earth.* Simeon's prophecy to Mary and Joseph with the infant Jesus in the Temple when He was 'but a few days old': *A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel.* His example is for us to follow as Paul noted in Acts 13:46-47, following the rejection of his message by the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, *we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us,* followed by the quotation of Isaiah 49:6. He told the Philippian Christians in Phil.2:15 *Live clean innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, hanged for his opposition to Hitler, once wrote: "A community of Jesus that seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Him." [*The Cost of Discipleship*, p.70] We are either part of the worlds' problems or part of its solution. The lights Jesus had in mind came from the wick of an oil lamp that needed to be trimmed regularly to maintain its light. Each lamp produced very little light, but in the darkness it only took a little to make a huge difference. Are you / am I hiding our lights? God is not looking for us to be like a helicopter search light, rather like a little torch or candle in the places where He has put us. Salt in small quantities is required for prevention of decay; light is required as a 'cure' for darkness over so many aspects of life in our society. How would you want people to remember you when you are gone? On 4 February 1968 at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, two months before his assassination, Martin Luther King said this in a sermon covering this subject. Listen to some of his words: I don't want a long eulogy of all the awards I got –Tell them not to mention that I have a Noble prize for peace ...or many other awards –that's not important...I'd like someone to say that M.L.K tried to give his life serving others...tried to love somebody...say that I was a drum major for peace... for righteousness... all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. I just want to leave a committed life behind... And that's all I want to say...if I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song; if I can show somebody he's travelling wrong, then my living will not be in vain. If I can do not duty as a Christian ought, if I can bring salvation to a world over wrought, if I can spread the message as the Master taught, then my living will not be in vain...[various on-line sources] How would you want people to remember you? To ask myself: How would I want to be remembered? To answer this question will help us live better in the present.

(b) **The Command of Jesus** *In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* (Matthew 5:16) The Sermon on the Mount is the most challenging sermon I have ever read; only Jesus could ever have delivered such a profound message. We are called to be counter-cultural and we find it very hard. However we need to heed warnings like that given in John 3:19-20: *This is the condemnation that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For everyone practising evil hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed.* In Jesus' day there was a monastic community called The Essenes, famous for the Dead Sea Scrolls. They called themselves "The Sons of Light". But they hid the light. Only in 1948 was some of their good work discovered! They had been out of existence for nearly 2000 years hiding their lights. They rightly opposed many evils of the day, but their policy of

withdrawal from society had next to no impact when they were alive. How sad! The question comes to each one of us individually as well as to us collectively as a church: How will we let our lights shine for the Lord in 2016? There is a small place for taking a stand against things and engaging in peaceful protests and campaigns. We applaud the work of the Christian Institute, Christian Concern, Care, Evangelical Alliance and other advocacy bodies that seek to speak out on particular issues and at times we will write to MPs and MSPs and meet with them, but opposing negative things can never be the ultimate answer. We are called to model an alternative way of living to that which we oppose. Too often Christians can be known for what they are against rather than what they are for. A church that is going to make a significant impact on its community will undoubtedly be one that models Christ-like care and love both within its ranks and to those whom it welcomes in from the wider community. In a world where our Gospel message is not well known by many people they need to see us live it out in our daily lives in the workplace; as we socialise and when they attend meetings and activities we put on. I thank God for the new people He has enabled us to have contact with over these past few years. Our challenge is how, with God's help we can bring people who have no interest in Jesus to become curious and want to learn about Him; our challenge is to provide opportunities for those curious to begin the faith journey and explore what it means to follow Jesus; our challenge is to enable those seriously searching to come to that place where they are willing to take a faith step and come and follow Jesus; our challenge is for those who have trusted Jesus to take the first steps in Christian discipleship in establishing good patterns of Bible reading and prayer and regular attendance in worship with us; it may be that some need to take the step of baptism or committing to membership and service in their local church; it may involve new faith steps of service or a renewed commitment to do our best in existing forms of ministry for Jesus. Whatever it is that the Lord lays on our hearts may we respond to His call. In Matthew 14 in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus walked on the water to the boat containing His closest disciples. Uncertain about the identity of the figure before them, Peter spoke out: *'Lord, if it's You,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to You on the water.'*<sup>29</sup> *'Come,' He said* (Matthew 14:28-29). Peter got out of the boat with all his doubts and fears and walked the walk... In 2016 we have a calling to follow with Jesus. The steps you take will be different to the person in front of you or behind you –the question for us all is this: Lord will you enable me to be the salt that enhances not diminishes the quality of relationships I have with the people I meet for the collective good and for Your glory? Lord by Your Spirit help me to be a light to people around me to point them to Jesus this year by my life and my acts of service. Collectively too in our verse for the year Jesus gives us this call: *You are the light of the world... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* May we heed His call and a year from now have great joy at the great things He has done in us and through us, for His glory Amen.