

Father Matthew Jacobson  
5 February 2023  
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Sunday Solemn Mass: Epiphany 5, Year A  
Habakkuk 3:1-6,17-19; Psalm 27:1-7; 1 Corinthians 2:1-11; Matthew 5:13-20

In today's Gospel passage, we meet Jesus in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus goes up on mountain. I picture it as a hot day, though with a bit of a refreshing breeze up there. He sits down and his disciples come around him. However, this sermon isn't just going to be for the disciples—the inner circle. They may be sitting up close to Jesus, but the crowds are packing in too, listening and astonished with what they're hearing.

First come the Beatitudes, which we heard last Sunday. “Blessed are the poor in spirit...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> Then comes what we heard today.

This scene, the Sermon on the Mount, with many gathered around Jesus, hanging on his every word, was also an image in a social media post I came across this week from Episcopal Church Memes. But, the words that the meme put on Jesus' mouth were: “...and remember to light the epistle candle first. That's on the right side of the altar as you face east. Then light the Gospel candle.”

Well, I suppose, Jesus did talk about light today in his sermon. What he said was, “Let your light so shine before [others], that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Of course, lighting candles on the altar in the proper order is important too, even if on its own, it won't fulfil all righteousness. There's nothing wrong with traditions like these—we do many things along these lines here at St. Mary's. There's nothing wrong as long as we use them to go beyond, to help us focus on God's brightness, which is like rays flashing forth—to use some language from our first reading.

We also heard Jesus teach about exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and the pharisees, the religious elite. Getting the order right on the candles is probably not going to be enough to do that. Jesus says that he's not looking to abolish the law and the prophets. He is looking to fulfil the law and the prophets—to realize their intent in the fullest sense! We too need to do something analogous as we head out into the world after being fed here at Mass—to fulfil the Mass's intent in the fullest sense!

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:1-12

I heard similar themes in a homily by Pope Francis recently when I was at an ecumenical vespers in Rome, which concluded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.<sup>2</sup> Working off of a passage in Isaiah,<sup>3</sup> the Pope spoke about the prophet's admonition about the futility of incense and offerings, if we aren't seeking justice for the oppressed—if we aren't seeking justice for those Jesus lists as blessed in the Beatitudes.

To be clear, much of the liturgy was in Latin and there was enough incense that even I could smell it all the way back in the cheap seats. Hopefully it all wasn't futile and led to some fulfilling.

Francis went on to discuss the concept of change and conversion. This was the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. He talked about being changed by God's grace, but focused more on transformation at the community level than as an individual. In part, I'm sure he was looking to motivate us as churches to work together. Probably, he had in mind how vespers would conclude. The Pope along with an Anglican and an Orthodox Archbishop gave the final blessing: Rome, Canterbury, and Constantinople, sending us out together.

This idea of conversion more collectively also connects well with how Jesus talks about discipleship and mission in the passage we heard from Matthew. He tells us that we're "the salt of the earth" and that we're "the light of the world". The way the Greek text is written, it emphasizes the plural of "you" or "you all". "*You all* are the salt of the earth" is what he tells the crowds. "*You all* are the light of the world". The passage is also written in a way that probably implies "you all" *and not* the religious establishment.

Now, the religious establishment of the Church was certainly on display that evening at papal vespers, with all the cardinals and important ecumenical guests seated up close to the Pope. We could also say that the lamp was not being put under a bushel. As we poured out of the basilica into this neighborhood, outside of the center of Rome, with the hordes of people in clericals and monastic habits, the church was certainly present to the world. Jesus said, "A city set on a hill cannot be hid." And, in a sense it wasn't.

Though, Jesus was focused on the city and not just the elite, and so, actually, it was during the metro ride back to the center that for me really illustrated the Pope's concept of conversion at a community level as well as our lesson from the Sermon on the Mount.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20230125-vespri-unitacristiani.html>

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 1:13, 17

The metro in Rome is similar in a few ways to the subway back here in New York (even if on a much smaller scale). For example, it gets pretty jammed up at rush hour. There are people from all walks of life. Lots of different languages. There's often a poor person asking for assistance whom everyone usually ignores.

And so it was that evening when a woman was walking through the train with a cup asking for spare change. Initially, everyone ignored her. But then, on her second lap through the car, somebody gave her a little something. Then someone else followed. Then at least two or three others also gave her something. It was almost as if a chain reaction was being set off.

When Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before [others]," it isn't about putting on a show. He continues with "that *they* may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

We shouldn't hide this light because the light is contagious. This is a light that others can be changed by too. It isn't just about a transformation of us as individuals, even if that's part of the story, but something that can happen on a community level if we just let it.

Ultimately, the light isn't ours, but God's. And, so, Jesus is calling for us to go out and reflect God's rays of light to the world.

It's no coincidence that Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes and then turns to what he is asking of those who are in front of him. Jesus had some rhetorical skills. Jesus shocks them with the Beatitudes. How can the poor and the meek be the ones that are blessed? The ones that have found favor with God? Then Jesus shocks them further by saying that their righteousness needs to exceed that of the scribes and the pharisees. But, they're the religious elite? How's that possible?

Of course, the concepts are intertwined. If we can begin to see in the way that God sees the world, who is blessed, then what Jesus is calling for us to do will fall into place, if we let it. That's really what it will take to exceed their righteousness. And, that's also when we will be living into our role as sharing "the light of the world."

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.