

MATTHEW 5:13-16  
WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

*"You can make a difference"* – this is the title of a Fischy Music song that I've sometimes sung in school assemblies. It was written to give children and young people a better sense of themselves and what they are able to do. *"I can make a difference, you can make a difference, we can make a difference to this world of ours!"* But... what do adults think? Surely, that naiveté is knocked out of us; we know more about the world and how hard a place the world can be; we know way other people think! The idealism of youth is one thing, but maturity suggests that it is simply too hard; we might have thought at one time that we could make a difference, but not now. Let me give you some more of the song: *I've got power.. to do some good, to change my attitude, to dream what I'd like to be; you've got the power - to go the extra mile, to listen for a while, to lend a helping hand, to try and understand, to choose between right or wrong, to show a little grace, to make this world a better place.* You'd agree that none of these lines in the song is beyond us? I hope you'd agree! We can make a difference.

There are two stumbling-blocks to today's sermon. First of all, "we can't do anything!" - that sense of powerlessness, or weakness that says "here is a world that has one set of values; here am I with a different set of values; what can I do to make a difference when everything is going in the opposite direction. I can understand that anxiety and we'll need to address that before we end. Secondly, there is an attitude that says "Here! Look at me! See how wonderful I am!" He's showing-off! There are people around who do good just to be seen to do good, so that the world will applaud them and tell them how wonderful they are; there are people who have only one topic of conversation - themselves! We shy away from even thinking about doing good in the world for fear that we get tarred with same brush, that people might think that we're setting ourselves up as holier than everyone else, "little-miss-goody-two-shoes"!

Jesus says to His friends: *"you are...you are..." (Matthew 5:13f)* We've come to the end of the Beatitudes, eight sayings that all began *"Blessed are..."*, eight qualities to aspire after as friends and disciples of Jesus; eight qualities of the one group of people. Here are the values and qualities of the disciples: to be poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, merciful, hungry for what is right, etc. For each of these qualities there is a promise of blessing from God: the kingdom of heaven, to inherit the earth, to be sons of God. If you missed any of them and want to find out what any individual Beatitude means then you can listen again to the sermon on CD, or read it in print, here or on the website. Jesus has painted a picture of the disciple: here is what my life as a disciple should look like, your life as a disciple should look like with these qualities and values. When I was in Sunday School, there were some things to learn off by heart and one of these was the list of the Beatitudes, along with the books of the bible, and the 10 commandments; you were given a sticker, or a bookmark or a sweet (if you were very unlucky it was menthol-eucalyptus!) for being able to recite them off by heart. Much more important than being able to recite the sayings is being able to live by these qualities, that these 8 values shape way we live life.

Then Jesus says: *"you are..." (Matthew 5:13f)* This is all about making a difference to the world around us. Both pictures of salt and light are about Christian influence in the world. Jesus is telling His friends that any influence they might have or hope to have in the world is entirely down to character. Any difference they will make to the world depends on Christian character. Nothing has changed. There is nothing accidental about Jesus putting these two pieces together: being salt and light in the world is all about being the kind of people pictured in the Beatitudes. People who do

live out these values and that character will change the world! We've described these qualities as Jesus' counter-culture because these values are very different, indeed at times exactly opposite, to the ways of our world; humbly and quietly living by these counter-cultural values makes a difference to the world little bit by little bit.

*"You are..." (Matthew 5:13)* I don't need to tell you what salt is! It is part of everyday life; you either use too much and need to cut down, or you don't put enough in your cooking and the food tastes a bit insipid! That is certainly one way of understanding these words of Jesus, that Christians give flavour to our world, that the world is better, life is fuller, society more palatable for having Christians around. But that may not be Jesus' meaning. In the first-century world, salt was also used to preserve food: salt was rubbed into meat to keep it from going bad, to preserve it, to stop it from rotting. The danger of salt being insipid came from white powder that looked like salt, but had none of the chemistry of salt and it didn't work, so was fit only to be thrown out, not even fit for the manure heap! You may not have seen the salt on the meat, but its influence was key; without it the meat would rot, would go bad, would be thrown out. *"You are...!"* This is not something to become, to strive for; Jesus says this we already are, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not.

Emlyn Williams was director of Scripture Union England and Wales for a time; I met him once and heard him say that in every place in the world where there is trouble of some kind, Christians are already there living the Christian life. For places, communities that are in the news, more often than not, there are Christians in these places already being Christians, being what Jesus wants and making a difference. Again, a comment was once made about Northern Ireland at its worst times, "how much worse would these times be if Christians were not praying for us". Christians are the salt of the earth; we make a difference in the world, we preserve the world from running headlong into all the evils that people can create! We are the salt of the earth when we keep our Christian character, when we live out the Beatitudes, when we keep our Christlikeness. We lose that saltiness when we become like the world in which we live, when Christians think in the same way the world thinks, when we are no different from the world around us. Here are two extremes: the Amish community in the Northern states of the USA remain untouched by the twenty-first century and live in a world of their own, so they make no difference to the world; there is a liberal strand of Christianity that aspires to make the church completely indistinguishable from the world, to have a church shaped by the values and attitudes of the world in order to make Jesus more acceptable, and that too will make no difference. Neither of these examples fits being what Jesus means about us being "salt"! People who live by Jesus' values in the world make a difference to the world.

*"You are..." (Matthew 5:14-16)* Anyone who has travelled to any big city or town at night knows what this picture looks like. If you fly into Edinburgh at night, from miles around you can see the lights of the city; you travel across remote countryside at night and you can see lights from lots of houses that during the day just can't see. A single candle in the dark can be seen for miles. But you don't light a candle and then put a bucket over it; apart from anything else the bucket will melt, but the light will be hidden! The disciple with a character shaped by the values of the Beatitudes is like light shining in the darkness; this is what we are, this is not something we aspire to become. Christian faith is to be lived out in everyday life; there are all kinds of visible manifestations of that faith and these values, and as we put these values into practice, light shines. Someone offends you in public; your friend with you waits to see how you react; you react with mercy and grace, even forgiveness; your friend wants to know why you did not exact revenge and retribution because that is what he would have done and what everyone he knows would have done. Light shines in the world as we live in Jesus' way. We make a difference.

Don't even think about showing off. None of this works if we try to show the world how good we are and make people think more highly of us as individuals. If we are trying to make a difference to build a personal reputation, then that is not being light in the world. Don't even think about trying to become holier than everyone else because that is wrong on so many levels. Equally, don't hide your light: in the scene we painted a moment ago, someone offends you and you want to respond with mercy and grace and forgiveness, but you know the company you're in, so you keep quiet, you say and do nothing at all; the light is hidden under the bucket because you're afraid of being different, afraid of being laughed at by your friends, afraid of having to explain yourself and your attitudes to people who might be hostile; so the light is hidden!

Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, and described their relationship with the world in this way: *"in which..." (Philippians 2:15b)* This whole train of thought started when Paul said *"Your attitude..." (Philippians 2:5)* As they thought like Jesus, spoke like Jesus, behaved like Jesus, they would shine like stars in the universe and hold out the word of life to others; they would make a difference. Jesus is the light of the world; Christians are the light of the world. Our light is reflected light! We reflect Jesus to the world; that is how we make a difference. The moon has no light of its own; yet the full moon lit up our dark world last week, reflecting the sun's light onto our streets at night. We have no light of our own; we reflect Jesus' light to our world. We do that when we think like Jesus, speak like Him, and behave like Him. When we do that humbly, and quietly, then people think more highly of Jesus who lives in us!

*"We have the power..."* Have you changed your mind? Is the song right? We can make a difference! Last week, Tom Hunter gave hundreds of thousands of pounds to *Children in Need* to make a difference! That's great. Is that what it takes to make a difference? No! Do some good; have the right attitude, change it if need be; go the extra mile with someone; listen to someone in need; lend a helping hand; try to understand someone having a hard time; choose between right and wrong; show a little grace. That's what it takes to make a difference to the world in which we live. None of these is beyond any of us. A man walked along the beach, which was covered in starfish; they had been beached by the high tide above the water line and were struggling. A little girl was going along the beach, throwing them back in; as the man went past her, he heard her muttering and listening more closely heard her say: "made a difference to that one!" She was making a difference to them one at a time. Our friends in Cambodia at CHO used to have a vision statement: "transforming hearts one at a time!" Put the values, the qualities of the Beatitudes into practice; learn to think, speak, and behave like Jesus - that's how we make a difference! Small things done in faith make a difference; humbly, quietly living for Jesus - that's how we make a difference! *"You are..."*