

“Salt and Light – Small Things”

(Matthew 5.13-16)

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The Rabbi’s Gift¹

Once upon a time there was a monastery that had fallen on hard times. It *had* been a great order, but now there were only five monks left – the abbot and four others, all over seventy. Clearly it was dying!

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a small hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used... a rabbi who everyone said was holy and wise. One day as he agonised over his dying order, it came to the Abbot, *‘I’ll go and see the rabbi. Maybe he can tell me what to do.’*

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut and listened carefully as he told him of his despair. But all he could do was commiserate. *“I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same for me. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.”* So the old men wept together. They read from the Scriptures and spoke of deep things. When it was time for the abbot to leave, they embraced. *“It has been a wonderful that we should meet after all these years,”* the abbot said, *“but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me?”*

“No, I am sorry,” the rabbi said. *“I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you... that the Messiah is one of you.”*

When the abbot returned to the monastery the monks gathered around, *“What did the rabbi say?”* *“He couldn’t help,”* the abbot answered. *“The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving... was that the Messiah is one of us. I have no idea what he meant.”*

In the weeks that followed, the old monks wondered about the rabbi's words. *The Messiah is one of us?* Could he possibly mean one of *them*?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He’s been our faithful leader for many years.

¹ This story comes from the Prologue of M. Scott Peck’s book, *The Different Drum* (1987). I’ve made some small edits and adaptations for this sermon.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that.

Certainly he could *not* have meant Brother Elred! Elred is so grumpy. But come to think of it, when you look back on it, he is often right. Maybe the rabbi did mean him?

But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so quiet. But then, he does have a gift for always being there when you need him. He just appears. Maybe *Phillip* is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

And as they wondered, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect... just on the off chance that one among them *might* be the Messiah. And they began to treat *themselves* with extraordinary respect... just in case.

People often visited the woods around the monastery... for it was a very beautiful place. And as they did, they sensed a change... this aura... this extraordinary respect that seemed to radiate out from these old men... and permeate the atmosphere of the whole place. There was something strangely compelling. They began to visit more often. Some of them started to talk with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another... and another...

The Calling

Jesus said, *"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world."* It's a high calling for those who follow Christ's way. Here's how Eugene Peterson translates it...

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth... Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world."

Who we are and the way we live our lives, is supposed to make a huge difference to the world... life is to be richer and more vibrant for *all* people... because of *us*. The metaphors are simple... *Salt* brings out the flavour in food – it can take that which is bland and make it rich... delicious... spicy even. *Light* breaks the shroud of darkness... We can see our way in

light, and we talk of the light at the end of the tunnel – if you can see light then there's hope. We are drawn to light... our spirits lift.

There's nothing difficult or complex in the metaphors, and this vision of who we could be is quite beautiful. And yet I cringe when I hear them, and I tried hard not to preach on this part of the text today... for I fear these words mock us. I want to say to Jesus, *'Lord, look at us! We're doing really well just to survive. We're tired, we're old and there's so few of us now – the young aren't interested anymore. How can we be flavour and light? I want to say to Jesus, 'Lord, look at me! I'm tired and I don't have any clever new ideas anymore. All I've ever known is failure and decline. There's no spice or spark left in me. How can I be flavour and light? '*

But that's the voice of despair... for within these metaphors there *is* hope. Because Jesus is speaking of *small* things... *small* things like a pinch of salt and a tiny oil lamp.

Small Things

Salt is used sparingly in cooking, because a pinch or two does what's needed. The light Jesus refers to is nothing grand, but rather the small oil lamp found in a peasant's cottage... a small flame no bigger than a candle, and yet in a dark room it makes such a difference... it changes everything.

He's speaking about *small* things... small things that make a *big* difference. Is it intentional? I think it is! *Matthew* says these are the words following The Beatitudes... alternative wisdom than only a few will ever embrace. It's like Christ is saying, *'I know only a small number will ever follow this way of life, but the difference they make to the world... because of the quality of their lives, will be enormous.*

I take comfort from this... Perhaps Christendom and all the years of our dominance were an aberration... a false path. Perhaps *small and on the margins* has always been our proper place in the world. *Small... flavourful... light filled and colourful.*

So take hope... for we're halfway there! We're getting the *small* part right... Now we just need to work on the *flavourful, light filled and colourful* bit!

Having a Go

It's why I like the 'Rabbi's Gift' story... It's a community in a hopeless situation – there's too few of them, they're too old... and they've run out of ideas. But one small whisper of possibility enters their life through the Rabbi's cryptic comment... and it is salt and light... it makes a difference to them. These old men make *one small* change in their life together – they start to treat each other with extraordinary respect... such a small change... anyone *could* do it... and yet it *is* salt and light... and a new future opens to them. Could *we* do that? Make a change in our lives... something qualitatively rich... *flavourful, light filled and colourful*... yet very small.

I like the 'Rabbi's Gift' story because each monk makes the decision to be different in their own heart – there's no meeting, no voting, no community resolution... just every one taking that cryptic possibility into their own life. It's like us today... We're not going to put anything into a vision statement or a logo... We're just going to our own homes, taking the voice of Christ with us. Who knows what would happen if we treasured these words, and pondered them, turned them over in our heart? "*You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.*" It's a bit like hearing... '*The Messiah is one of you.*'