

## **Let your light so shine...**

So, if you do something good, should you let other people know about it? Or should you keep it secret? The impression we have from the sermon on the mount, is that we're supposed to let other people see the good things we do... a city on a hill cannot be hidden... no one lights a lamp and keeps it under a bowl... let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven. – Hey presto – everyone's a winner.

Unless you read anything else in gospels. In fact, you have to put your fingers in your ears for the rest of the sermon on the Mount – because within half a chapter, we read “be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly, I tell you they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you!

Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing – so that your giving may be in secret.

Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven.

Now, at this stage, you may end up wondering just what Jeremy Paxman would say to Jesus if he were interviewing him. If a politician tried saying such blatantly contradictory moral demands, almost in the same breath, we would call for their resignation.

It was a question, raised in our talks on economics – which I'm really hoping to finish writing up today. Tim, who gave the second talk, highlighted the ambiguity in the words of Jesus. Should we let people know what we do with our money? Or should we keep it secret? Jesus seems to demand both!

Don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing! Nobody really knows what that meant originally. I can remember in the Royal Air Force, working for Wing Commander Brown who used the phrase regularly to complain about the management – or about his underlings. When people didn't know what they were doing – he would tweak his moustache like General Melchit, and declare, “the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing.”

Originally, I suspect, it was something to do with counting. Coins in Jesus' day were not like modern coins – where you can look in your hand and see the coppers, the silvers, the pound coins. When it came to counting what you give to someone, my guess is that you would have needed both hands – so, the left hand not knowing what the right is doing... simply means that you're not counting what you give. It's secret even from the giver ... don't let the left hand know what the right is doing. That, it seems to me, is what Jesus was getting at. Not even the giver knows what is given.

A bit of a nightmare when you come to claim gift aid and fill in your annual returns. But Wing Commander Strangely Brown, was probably not far from the truth.

It's not so much – keep your giving secret. It's more a question of not knowing what you're giving – not counting it against your own security and comfort.

So, coming back to the idea of letting your light shine! Does that really mean that we broadcast the great things that we do so that the rest of the world can appreciate us, and we can wrap our smugness into the 'oh don't thank me – thank God! Because I only do these selfless good deeds to glorify him!' I really don't think that kind of emotional immaturity is being encouraged by Jesus.

Much better, again, to think of the context. That Jesus is addressing a bunch of peasants in the hills of Galilee. You remember – in Jerusalem, people asked if any good thing could come from Galilee. And the people Jesus is addressing are known as the People of the Land – the lowest of the low! These are the people that don't count, and who – through Roman occupation and hierarchical religion, have been made to feel they don't count. And then, Jesus tells those present that they are the salt of the earth!

The salt of the earth! What on earth does that mean? Usually we are told to think – are – salt has a function – it preserves, it seasons, well – there are no end of metaphors to tell us that salt is important and useful. Well – possibly. But maybe there is another way of reading this! Salt from the sea comes in a different form to salt from the earth! Salt from the earth comes in the form of crystal! It is beautiful – precious – hippies make lamps out of this salt because of its relaxing and beautiful qualities. Imagine, believing and having been made to believe that you are nothing – and Jesus tells these nobodies that they are precious! Arising from the earth into something beautiful and precious! But of course, the precious quality of who they are has for centuries been denied – if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? Jesus as happened to them. Affirming the preciousness of who they are – Jesus is preaching good news to the poor!

And this reading, it seems to me, is confirmed by what follows. You are the light of the world! Usually, of course, we regard this as an evangelism thing: you have this special light because you're a Christian, so you must share it with the rest of the world... let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds, and instantly commit to give their lives to Christ! No !

The light! What does that mean? The light may not be some special property that Christians possess which others do not! Light seems more of a metaphor for life: this is how Jesus has used it elsewhere – the eye is the lamp of your body! There is something here to do with celebrating what God has already blessed us with. This is an affirmation about what impresses God: almost a command to believe that these people have the capacity to please God. Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good deeds, and glorify your father in heaven.

People are not being commanded to shine, any more than they are being commanded to breathe. Jesus has made this plain enough by saying, a city on a hill cannot be hidden – you cannot help but show who you are. That is inevitable. What counts is who you are glorifying with the light that you share. Because, after all, it is perfectly possible for people to look at our good deeds, and pity us. To look at our good deeds, and wonder why it is we feel the need to gratify ourselves by rushing around and trying to be seen to do lots of good things for people! Good deeds themselves, are not the light. They can be the very opposite. Let your

light so shine before people, that they may see your good deeds, and glorify your father in heaven.

It is an affirmation, once again, to be who you are ... warts and all ... to be who you are and to let whatever good stuff you do to surface naturally, because that is the kind of stuff that glorifies god. The people who do this – will have no idea that they are doing good deeds.

Think of it – 7 year old boy sits in the living, and gets up to tidy up some of the mess that he has made. He has no idea he's doing it. But daddy's reaction is to say – “Oh Good boy.” The whole thing is completely natural. Little girl feels left out by the affirmation of big brother. Little girl gets up to make some half-hearted token gesture of cleaning up a bit of mess, and immediately starts crying because she hasn't received the same affirmation. There is a world of difference between the two sets of good deeds.

It is easy to do good deeds for others, to satisfy no one other than ourselves. If Saint Augustine were here, he would tell us to forget about doing good things for others. He would tell us instead, simply to be who we are in the presence of God – to love God, and let the good deeds look after themselves. That way – we won't even know that we are doing them! Don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing! Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good deeds, and glorify your father in heaven – implication being – that you will know nothing about it!

No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl. The salt of the earth, has been unearthed and is there to see in all its preciousness and beauty. Jesus is affirming these people who do not believe that they have the capacity to please God.

They believe and have been made to believe that they are nothing. Those who please God are the wealthy, the land owners – maybe the Pharisees who follow all the rules and know their bibles. But not me.

Those without the capacity to please God are the sinners: those who have done bad things, things so bad you can get a label on it so that everyone can condemn you.

Those without the capacity to please God are the tax collectors – those with ill-gotten gain, who can always be made to feel guilty.

Those without the capacity to please God are those whose identity is bound up in stuff that is secondary – it isn't who these people really are.

Jesus says – forget all that stuff: ‘you are the light of the world’ – ‘you are the salt-crystals risen from the dust of the earth’. Jesus says to each one of us, no matter who we are or where we are from or what we have done or what we believe about ourselves – Jesus says to each one of us, that here and now, we – even we – have the capacity to please God – to put a smile on the face of God!

There is light – in each one – and rather than straining our moral sinews and working ourselves into a breakdown to do good and be seen to do good – let your light shine in such a way – that the good stuff you do takes place without you even knowing about it!

That – is good news to the poor.

That is why there is no contradiction between not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing – and letting your light shine before people.

That is why, here and now, the ability to make God happy is within our grasp.