

3. *Israel*

You are the salt of the earth. If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

Matthew 5:13-16

The people

For many people, certainly in this day and age, faith is closely bound up with special attention for Israel, the Jewish people. Aren't the Jews the Christians' "older brothers" and isn't the Old Testament in the first instance the book of the people of Israel? The establishment and development of the modern Israeli state following 1948 gave strong, new impulses to these feelings. Despite this state's un-Christian character and to a certain extent hostility to Christianity, many people still watch it with eager expectation: will God make Israel the focal point of the nations in a kind of a thousand-year kingdom? Many feel that God cannot get along without Israel, certainly not for good.

God's history has certainly granted this people a special position. But not from the start. God has been writing world history from the very first day. His concern focuses on the nations, not only before but also after the flood. He ranks no nation above the other. But when the nations continue their steadfast rejection of God after the construction of the tower of Babel and the confusion of the languages, the Lord searches for a small base from which He can operate in the rest of the world. Abram is called. God's purpose remains opening a way to the nations and does not mark the beginning of a nationalistic tendency in His work. Abram, the father of Israel, will be called Abraham, the father of many nations. Through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This was Israel's beginning: the nations remained the goal while this one nation became an instrument to reach them. Henceforth God lands His gifts on this base. The Law of God, good for all people, is entrusted to Moses. The promise of a King who will bless the earth, reaches the house of David. In this way Israel became the nation that had something unique

to offer: wisdom of God. Even the Queen of Sheba comes to obtain it. In the first century AD the Jews were quite conscious of their position. Paul describes it as follows “You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (Romans 2:17-21).

Jesus confirms this special position in the Sermon on the Mount. He turns to the crowds from Israel and says without any reservations: “You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.” These words are not limited to the disciples of Jesus. Threat and exhortation accompany them as well. The whole of the Sermon on the Mount is instruction of the crowds and Jesus would certainly have spoken more conditionally (as He did in verse 11) if He had only intended to address His remarks to the people who had become His disciples. Having arrived on earth Jesus begins with Israel too. God has built a city on a hill there: Jerusalem, Zion, the beacon for the world, and there in His law, God has kindled the light which now shines on the lampstand, on the menorah Israel, for the nations everywhere where synagogues are located. God’s Son begins with the one nation to which God pulled back in history in order that He might win back all the nations through it.

The light of the world

In His words directed to Israel Jesus shows how God intends to reach the nations. The title “Salt of the earth” is not a compliment. No one eats salt in and of itself. Salt is esteemed when it makes other food tasty. Light does not exist as an entity all by itself: it is not thriftily saved by being hid under the corn bushel found somewhere in every Middle Eastern house. Light is valued because we can see each other with it: in the one room apartment common in the Orient everyone sees everyone else present thanks to the light. Salt and light exist for their surroundings. Thus an out-of-order Israel immediately becomes uninteresting and useless to the world.

Jesus’ statements represent a continuation of all kinds of things said by the prophets of the Old Testament. Their uniqueness here comes from their connection to the Beatitudes which just preceded them. Forming a kind of postscript for the Beatitudes, verses 13 to 16 become even sharper for the people.

Verses 3 to 12 clarify how the salt of the earth should taste: it should taste like Jesus. It is also clear what color the light should be: it has to spread the glory of Christ. The call to be meek and even to be persecuted for Jesus' sake lands right in the middle of a people that up to now had the function of a lighthouse in the world. This nation's task now becomes making known and confessing to the world the Son of God, sent to Israel. The healings and miracles so brilliantly performed among the people, particularly among this people, are intended to activate them to be world-salt and world-light.

The good works Israel is supposed to demonstrate to the world are the good works of the Beatitudes, the works of faith in the Messiah who has come and is sovereign: He is the light of the world, and He has come to Israel. May this people grasp its calling for humanity anew.

This call is not neutral. Jesus links a veiled threat to it: tasteless salt will be thrown out the door as worthless, just like so much garbage in the Orient which lands on the street only to be trampled underfoot. Jesus employs a striking expression. He speaks about salt that "has become foolish." In this way we know that He is talking about people, not salt. A people can become "foolish" by rejecting Jesus. If that people just happens to be the salt of the earth, they become tasteless too. They will be trampled underfoot. This happened: in the year 70AD the city on the hill fell to the besieging Romans. Consequently, the Jewish people, in so far as they remained un-Christian, have no longer any significance in leading the nations to God's kingdom. The people as nation, instead of God's kingdom, came to stand in the lime-light. But what is salt without taste? What purpose does a lampstand, a menorah, have, when the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, has no place on it? Jesus issues a timely warning to preserve Israel from national meaninglessness. For that reason He exhorts the people in the Sermon on the Mount: accept and mirror God's light in the darkness!

The nations

Jesus' words contain not only a veiled threat, but also an open encouragement. A city which God builds and a fire which He kindles cannot remain hidden. He makes sure of that Himself. When the nations default following the flood, He lights a flame in Israel and constructs Zion. When Israel turns its back on Jesus,

God insures that some Jews still believe and He adds to them many Christians from other nations. The Christian church remains secured.

This church, the renewed Israel gathered by faith, also falls under the law of salt and light. In the new covenant the church has sometimes acted as if it had intrinsic importance. When that occurs Jesus' word becomes arousing and threatening power against the church too: tasteless salt is thrown away and light must shine if it is to have any significance. The issue was neither the glory of the people of Israel then, nor is it the honor of new Israel now. Only one thing is important: that other people see God's light through us and glorify our heavenly Father.

That happened too: by holding high the light of Christ's gospel Peter and the other apostles brought many pagans to kneel before God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

It has to continue in this way. The gospel is not an alibi, but a task. In and of itself the church is of no importance. The only thing that counts in this world is the glory of God.