

Lots of Christians think of Judaism as a worn-out, rigid old religion that needs to be replaced. Apparently Jesus didn't think that way. When Jesus gave the teachings that are parts of the Sermon on the Mount, he was speaking as a Jew to Jews. He apparently thought of himself as part of a vital religious tradition through which God had been at work for centuries and through which God was just about to do something new and even greater. When Jesus spoke of fulfilling the law and the prophets, he was calling all who would take him seriously to commit themselves to something really big, something that many of us have not yet taken into our lives.

St Matthew also thought that Jesus came to bring the faith of the Jewish people to fulfilment. As he told the story of Jesus, he did several things to suggest his story was like the story of Moses, the great leader and law-giver. Sometime you might play with comparing the stories to see if you can spot the similarities. One of the most obvious of these is that he pictures Jesus going up a mountain to give his teachings, just as Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the law of God and the covenant God made with his people.

The truth is that first-century Judaism was an alive and vital religion. It spread throughout the world. There were important Jewish communities in Alexandria, Antioch, Babylon, Rome, and all of the great cities of the first-century world. As the Christian movement developed, tensions and conflicts developed between Christians and Jews. But it is important for us to remember that the Christian faith developed within the Jewish faith.

Jesus knew that. He made it clear that he did not come to replace the law and the prophets; rather to bring the faith they taught to vital fulfilment so that people living out of this fulfilled Judaism could become God's agents for changing the world, salt of the earth, light of the world.

When Jesus said 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,' he meant to pay them a compliment. Jesus appreciated the Pharisees, because they were the ones who were taking their religion seriously. And many of the Pharisees had an appreciation for Jesus, just think of Nicodemus. Sometimes great tension developed between them as we know!

The Pharisees were most interested in retaining the integrity of their religious tradition so it would not melt away into the sophisticated Greek and Roman culture in which they lived. Jesus, on the other hand, was most interested in recovering the vitality of the faith of a people committed to living in a covenant relationship with God. Add in his divinity and you can understand their relationship, interest and conflict.

Well, just what are we to make of that? It is important for us to ask that question, because as we read the Hebrew Scriptures we hear them telling a story of a long and varied and often torturous history in which the Jewish people often departed from their essential faith in first one direction and then in another. There are two aspects of the Jewish heritage that Jesus was most eager to recover and bring to fulfilment:

The first of these was a commitment to being part of a unique community of people whom God called into being to serve the purposes of God. The Jewish people knew nothing of a solitary religion. To be a Jew was to be part of a community of people whose life and history was shaped by living in a covenant relationship with the God who was committed to justice and fullness of life for

all people. When God first made a covenant with Abram, the earliest ancestor of the Jewish people, he called him to venture into a new life so that God could bless him to be a blessing (Genesis 12:1-2). That gave every Jew something to live up to.

The second aspect of the Jewish faith Jesus was eager to recover is a commitment to the purpose of God for all people. This is the aspect of the Jewish heritage that the Jewish people most often lost sight of during their history. When the prophets wrote late in Israel's history, after the disaster of their defeats by the Assyrian and the Babylonians, they most often called the people to recover these aspects of their faith. Isaiah called them to be a nation that practices righteousness and does not forsake the ordinances of their God.(Isaiah 58:6-8)

In another passage, the prophet represented God, saying:

*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

(Isaiah 42:6-7)

This is the heritage that Jesus came to bring to fulfilment.

It is not hard to see how Jesus and the members of the early church worked at bringing this fulfilment. In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us how to live in a life-shaping relationship with the living God that will exceed the vitality of the righteousness of the most pious Pharisees. And St Paul was constantly writing to the early churches, urging them to commit themselves to building up the communities of faith and living lives that would make a witness to the love of God in a pagan world. Jesus taught his followers to go into the world and live lives that would make a difference in the world, to be the light of the world, and to be the salt of the earth. St Matthew has Jesus ending his gospel by commissioning his followers to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19). Then the rest of the Bible tells the story of how they did it.

The big question is, what are we doing with the calling to be members of a unique community to serve the purpose of God? What are we doing with the commission to live lives that will make a difference in the world?

We have a problem. There is a littleness in our culture that often infiltrates our religion and keeps us from living up to the bigness of the faith to which Jesus calls us. For one thing, we are so individualistic that it is hard for us to see the importance of being part of a covenant community. We don't like to believe we need anyone else to make our religion complete or that we have any responsibility to anyone else. It has become extremely fashionable to talk about being spiritual people but not being a part of any "organised religion."

Our culture has lost much of its sense of moral accountability. We seem to think that we really ought to feel free to do just about anything we want to do without feeling any sense of responsibility either for the cost of our actions or for the effects of our actions upon the community as a whole. It is amazing how many things we have managed to convince ourselves are okay. That too has infiltrated and subverted our religion.

The self-centeredness of our culture has infiltrated our religion too. Many people have chosen to have a religious faith primarily because of the benefits they hope to gain for themselves. When people look for a church to join, they are likely to do it as if they are shopping for a new car, asking which church will give them the most advantages and/or entertainment for the lowest possible investment. Few look for a church that will give them opportunities to make their lives count in the services of the purpose of God. Knowing that this is true, churches are seduced to structure their congregational lives to attract people who are shopping in that way and think that is the only way to grow the Church. Unsurprisingly there is no middle or long term future in it. Its been evident for the last fifty years- I have seen its allure, deception and failure time after time after time.

So long as we are thinking in this way, we are not likely to be able to catch the vision of the bigness of the faith to which Jesus calls us. We are not likely to be responsive to the call to become a part of a unique covenant community called into existence by God for the purpose of doing God's loving work in the world.

But if we take an honest look at the world we live in, we will see that the littleness in our culture has effects that result in our being desperately in need of some who will come with a bigger vision. Our world needs some who will be salt to give new quality to life in our world. Our world needs some who will be a light to enable people to see things as they really are and to catch a vision of the better possibility God offers.

Fortunately, there are still some people who catch the vision of the bigness of the calling to be God's covenant people and who give themselves to it with joyful commitment. That's our task, to be salt and light, salt and light....

Fr Robert Newton