



Isaiah 58.3-8
Matthew 5.13-20
9th February 2020

‘Now add a pinch of salt...’

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

You can't really do children's talks anymore about the value of salt in cooking. The last time I tried, half the congregation shouted out that salt, or at least adding too much into our food, is bad for you!

Yet, in the biblical age, before preservatives in food and freezers in kitchens, salt was a necessity. It seasoned, preserved and was even used as a disinfectant for wood!

You could use salt as a unit of exchange, a sort of currency. And sometimes, at The Temple, salt was sprinkled on the burnt offerings.

All of this salt basically came from two sources. It was harvested around the Dead Sea area, especially from the salt cliffs that stretched seven miles along the shoreline. And it was manufactured, in that sea water would be poured into huge holes, with the water left to evaporate leaving the salt to be collected.

So, although the metaphor of salt works less well today, in Jesus time it was an absolute winner.

This was Jesus encouraging the emerging community that would one day be called Church, to be a force for good in the world. To be a positive people striving to preserve life in a wholesome way.

Salt made life good and flavoursome, it stopped the decomposition of food. So, says Jesus, in the same way you, my disciples, are called to live in such a way that your life adds hope to the world.

I'm struck by how positive and upbeat the gospel writers are at times as they put their writings together. The Church they were addressing was small and struggling. Those initial decades after the death of Jesus were ones of fear and persecution.

When we think of Church with a capital C, we often picture great cathedrals or the glories of Rome. Yet, it didn't start out like this.

Instead of grand buildings the early Christians met in houses. Instead of coming together on a Sunday which was set aside for worship, they met early that morning and then went off to work because by then no one had invented the weekend.

This relatively small, yet incredibly courageous, community – the Early Church – was persecuted at the whim of succeeding Emperors. This was a vulnerable people, yet Matthew says; you can be salt and light. You can have a positive influence, indeed that's

your role in society, to make a difference for good in the name of Love.

We sometimes need to hear that today, even as we feel vulnerable.

Numbers are not on our side. An article in a recent edition of *The Spectator* concludes that by 2076 Christianity, at least in terms of numbers, will be almost invisible in the UK. It concluded the cathedrals will still be standing but there won't be any priests or worshippers to fill them.

Of course, no one knows any of this for sure, but it's interesting that the prophets of doom in the media now feel so confident of our demise that they are even putting a date to it.

So, just like those who heard these gospel words the first time round, who felt vulnerable, we hear them in a similar position today, and the message is the same. No matter how side-lined you feel and no matter how challenging it might be to speak counter-culturally, we are still called to be salt and light.

The first edition of *Engage* for 2020, the Baptist Missionary Society's magazine, carried a story from Bangladesh following last year's destructive monsoon season. The BMS Relief Fund was used to finance the Bangladesh Baptist Union to provide 1000 people in three remote villages with emergency packs. Those packs went to Christian, Hindu and Muslim families and contained things like 30kg of rice, 2kg of salt, 5l of oil and 3kg of dhal along with 6 packets of matches.

One lady said no-one had come to help them, then the Bangladeshi Baptist Union volunteers arrived, she said: I didn't have any hope, but help comes from God and from you.

In this case being salt literally meant giving it away.

I know this is small scale stuff, but isn't it often in a project and activity such as this, small and unnoticed by the media, that the love and hope of God, poetically called 'salt' in today's reading, comes into our world and makes that positive, life enhancing and affirming difference.

So, how does salt lose its saltiness? It's an important question because Jesus warns it can happen when it comes to faith.

Wasn't bland salt Jesus' way of describing ineffective theoretical belief. The sort that seems to know a lot yet rarely makes us into changed or energised disciples. The sort of faith that stays in our heads rather than is expressed tangibly by our hands, never truly lived out, it never, tragically, becomes transformative.

Read the Gospels and we are in no doubt that Jesus concluded such ineffective and theoretical faith seemed to characterise many around him, especially those who were religious professionals. And perhaps, from time to time, we see it in ourselves too. Moments when we readily acknowledge that knowing about prayer isn't the same as praying and talking about love isn't a substitute for loving.

Salt losing its saltiness is another way of talking about knowledge without action and that can be disastrous.

What's the phrase? Evil flourishes when good men do nothing.

Knowledge without action means that racism and oppression flourish.

Martin Niemoller was a German Lutheran Pastor who, alongside, Bonhoeffer, was one of the leaders of The Confessing Church, a Church that stood against Nazi tyranny. Like

Bonhoeffer, Niemoller was sent to a concentration camp. Unlike Bonhoeffer he survived and lived on until 1984.

Perhaps Niemoller's most memorable piece of writing, borne of the most intense experience as a Christian who did make that connection between knowledge and action, is contained in these well-known and poignant words of his:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

If we are not to lose our saltiness, we too need to strive to connect our knowledge to our actions.

The challenge to be salt and light never goes away. It's an imperative that stays with us until the end.

This idea is developed by Jesus in the second half of today's gospel reading when he declared he hadn't come to abolish the Law but complete it.

Jesus was born into a religious tradition of stories and commands. The idea of God was expressed in the beautiful poetry of the Psalms and the way of God in the Ten Commandments. The Jewish Scriptures are divided into diverse genres that explore the essence of God such as The Law, The Prophets and The Writings.

Jesus was born into the tradition of Isaiah and would no doubt have been familiar with those beautiful words we read this morning from chapter 58 as God says:

The fast I require is to loose the fetters of injustice, to set free those who are oppressed, to share food with the hungry and clothe the naked.

Surely this is what it means to be salt and light. To live a life seeking justice and showing kindness to neighbours.

Jesus said to his followers, I haven't come to abolish such an understanding of God or such a beautiful way of living. But to complete it – but what does that mean?

Well, in a sense isn't it about knowing all of life remains incomplete until we take our final breath. Every day we must continue with the task. Every phase of life brings fresh challenges that both stretch and deepen our faith.

I think, in a way, Jesus is teaching us here that our beliefs constantly have to be challenged – just as he challenged the traditions of his day, deepening and expanding the teachings he'd heard at Synagogue School.

What it meant, for me, to love God and neighbour in my carefree college days was something different than what it means to me now as the father of two young adults.

Our beliefs have to grow with us, they need to run parallel to our life experience, which is fluid and always evolving. Not locked up in some sort of never changing Sunday School understanding of God, but constantly being honed and tested in the rough and tumble of everyday living.

Always exploring and always applying old truths to new situations, never giving up being salt and light.

One sultry August afternoon a few years ago, in Washington, we paid a visit to the Lincoln Memorial. It's a huge, almost overpowering, statue of the President seated looking out up the Mall towards the Capitol.

It was in the days of cameras and as one of us took a photo of the marble statue the camera told us it detected that Lincoln had blinked!

Well, that's not the reason I remember being in this space to me that felt sacred.

It's because from those very steps on which we were standing The Revd Martin Luther King gave his Dream Speech at the height of the American Civil Rights Campaign – perhaps one of the most moving and significant speeches of the entire twentieth century.

And what a place to give it with Lincoln in the background. Lincoln who, although reluctantly at first, had come to the conclusion that Slavery could not remain the norm in those newly formed United States. A position that resulted in the ideological struggle of the Civil War. A war about human identity.

Lincoln won. Yet that victory was just the beginning not the end. There still needed to be more salt and more light. The campaign was not complete.

So Luther King goes to the Lincoln Memorial, not to undo the work of the one it commemorates, but to build upon it.

Years later, the day before his inauguration President Obama made the same journey.

Jesus hadn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, but in a way model to us the reality that every generation needs to search afresh for the salt and light that makes faith real in our day.

Of course we stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank God for wonderful teachers, mentors and role models of faith in my life. Yet I know that everyday I must live this day with my faith, not theirs.

Always exploring, always applying, always looking for the salt and light.

May it be so in the name of Jesus, the great Interpreter of our faith. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 5th February 2020