

Salt and light

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Sunday 9 February 2020

Refs: Isaiah 58.1-9a; 1 Corinthians 2.1-12; Matthew 5.13-20

“You are the salt of the earth; You are the light of the world” In our gospel reading, Jesus gives us two very different, complementary pictures of what it means to live as his disciples in the world. Salt, when mixed in food, becomes invisible whereas visibility is what light is all about! Salt is dispersed, mixed in and spread through the food. Light is often a focal point shining outwards.

One of the best books I read in my early Christian days was called *“Out of the saltshaker”*. It was an appeal to Christians not to hide away from the world in the company of other Christians, but to be out in the world, to mix in and be part of the world – like salt that must be shaken out of the salt pot, scattered, dispersed and mixed in with the food in order to fulfil its function.

I believe St Peter’s is a salty church, embedded in our local community. And we are a salty congregation, involved in our community and involved in the world. We are dispersed, scattered, and mixed in with the world around us. That’s brilliant, something to celebrate.

Of course, Jesus then asks the challenging question – how salty are we? Salt mixed in with food, cannot be seen, but it can be tasted. And salt has a function, much more important than just its flavour. These days we are aware of the danger of too much salt. But in Jesus’ day it would have been the other way round – salt was expensive, and it could be hard to get enough of it. And in the days before refrigeration, salt had the vital function to preserve food, stopping it spoiling. Originally meats were cured with salt, not because people liked the taste, but to stop them going off. Even today it’s noticeable that cured meats have a long sell by date.

Jesus tells us it’s not enough to be dispersed and mixed in with the world, we also need to be distinctive. We have a role – following the image of salt – to make the world a purer and more palatable place.

Our Old Testament reading is addressed to God’s people who have lost their saltiness. They look like they’re doing the right things, fasting, praying and being very religious. But out in the world, they are oppressing their workers, quarrelling and fighting, just like everybody else. They had lost their distinctiveness, their saltiness. The prophet appeals to them to be different – to free people from injustice and oppression, to feed the hungry, to look after the homeless, to clothe the naked, and to stop turning their backs on the needs of their fellow men and women. In Jesus’ words, to recover their saltiness.

For us, it’s not enough just to be out there mixed into the world. We need to be distinctive – doing our little bit, doing what we can, to help bring transformation to our world, making the world a fairer place and caring for God’s Earth, for the good of all people.

This is a constant theme in the Old Testament. It’s there in our psalm today – justice, generosity, and caring for the poor. I believe this is what Jesus means when he says, in our gospel, reading that he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. I don’t think he’s remotely interested in carefully following every detailed ceremonial law. He didn’t do that himself. Rather he is saying that the clarion call of the Old Testament, to seek for justice, to build a fairer world and to care for the needy – that clarion call still stands and always will.

Maybe that’s the problem with the Scribes and Pharisees at the end of our Gospel reading. They are careful to preserve their personal purity, but they are doing nothing about justice for the poor. Jesus is saying, I’m asking you to do more than they are doing, not less.

So I rejoice that we're a salty church. That we're embedded and mixed in with our community and our world. That we do care about justice and the needs of the poor and are seeking the transformation of our world. That is surely what it means to be the salt of the earth.

But what about light? What about being the light of the world?

It's often struck me that there are salty churches, embedded in their communities and working for justice, and there are light churches that proclaim the gospel for all to hear. Often churches have been either one or the other. Jesus doesn't give us the choice. He wants us to be both!

Last autumn, I went to a very interesting day run by the Church Urban Fund. It was all about churches being both salt and light. Particularly it was about light churches learning to be salt as well. I think some churches are learning that you can proclaim the gospel as loudly as you like but nobody will listen if you're not engaged in the community. It was inspiring to hear about light churches learning to be salt in their communities because today I don't think we can get away with being either/or. Today I believe we must be both – as Jesus told us to be.

Today, just as Light churches are learning to be Salt, so Salty churches are learning to be Light. Sometimes that means learning new ways of thinking, and new ways of doing things.

Jesus points out that a lamp is no good if it is hidden away – it needs to be up on a lampstand.

But broadcasting our light out into the world is not straightforward. I don't think it's about advertising our church services and events though that can be part of it. It's about proclaiming the good news of how God, through Jesus, can transform our lives.

We may not feel very confident about this. We may feel that our lives don't shine very brightly! We may be very aware of our own darkness – of the darkness in ourselves and the darkness in our lives. We may be painfully aware of the darkness in the church as well so when we hear how the church is reported in the media, we may feel that the church doesn't shine very brightly either!

But the good news is that it's not our own light that we are talking about here. It is the light of Jesus shining in the darkness of ourselves, shining in the darkness of our lives, and shining in the darkness of the church with all its failings. And I believe that as the light of Jesus shines in the darkness of our own lives, so it will shine through our darkness out to others.

I think this is what St Paul is talking about in today's epistle which is all about how we shine as a light in the world. St Paul was only too aware of the darkness in himself, and that he was proclaiming not himself but Christ, and how he experienced the light of Christ shining in his own darkness.

He says "*I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling*" which is precisely how it is with us, as we proclaim not our light, but the light of Jesus shining in our darkness.

St Paul also goes on to say that we need the wisdom of God that so often, as St Paul says, seems to be secret and hidden. As he says, "*None of the rulers of this age understood this*".

Doesn't that sound familiar today! As someone has said, the biggest enemy of Christian faith is ignorance.

At the end of the TV drama series based on His Dark Materials, Lord Asriel says that religion is about making us feel guilty, about controlling us, oppressing us, frightening us and, in his words, keeping us on our knees. We must admit that perhaps the church has sometimes been a bit like that. But it is important for us to proclaim the truth – that faith in Christ doesn't make us feel guilty – it releases us from guilt. And it doesn't confine us and restrict us – it opens up life, opens up possibilities in our lives, and gives us the courage to explore life more fully. It doesn't keep us helpless and dependent – rather it gives us the Spirit who enables us to grow as human beings, and empowers us to take on challenges we never would have dared to take on without our faith in God strengthening us and giving us confidence.

In a society that thinks it knows what faith is about, but clearly does not, we need to proclaim our liberating and life-giving faith that is different from the caricature of faith in so many people's minds.

Salt and Light. So very different – and yet both so important. Engaging deeply in our community and our world, seeking transformation in our society and in our world. And also seeking ways to proclaim our life-giving faith in Christ, who shines as a light through our darkness.

Salt and Light. A challenge for our church. And a challenge for each one of us.