

“Salt and Light”

Matthew 5: 13 – 20

Crowds had gathered to Jesus at a location on a hillside somewhere by Lake Galilee. He took this opportunity to tell them what it means to be his followers. Jesus doesn't say following Him will be easy and he stresses the importance of living this way if we want to experience all that God has for us – that is what is meant by entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

I love the straightforward way Jesus speaks to his disciples. Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to become salt and light, do this...." Or, "before I call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you...." Rather, he says both simply and directly, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." We are faced with the temptation to hear Jesus' words as requirement rather than blessing, as command rather than commissioning. It is, as with last week's Beatitudes, sheer blessing, commendation, affirmation, and commissioning.

Now that is pretty challenging and can feel a pretty big responsibility – it is easy for us to feel totally inadequate.

I am aware that he goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness is useless and that light wasn't made to be put under a bushel, which might imply for some that there is huge challenges behind this pronouncement. But I wonder. Can salt really lose its saltiness? Doesn't it just dissolve? Apparently along the edges of the Dead Sea salt became so mixed with sand that it lost its taste. It is important for us to maintain our flavour. Then think of candles – were they ever put under bushel baskets? Wouldn't that snuff the flame or, worse, start a fire? Maybe Jesus is implying that one can lose one's status as salt and light. Or maybe he's just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light assuring us of the gift He has given us.

Hear again what Jesus actually said to his followers:

You are the salt of the earth, You are the light of the world. You are.

You are now. Not you could be, or should be. Not tidy up your act, stiffen your will power, and commence trying. Not maybe in ten years time, nor if you work very hard perhaps by the end of the year.

Jesus did not say to his disciples “Now go off, learn these creeds, sign this mission statement, undertake these spiritual exercises, pray for two hours each day, read two chapters of the Bible each day, fast and meditate; then you will start to becoming the light of the world. Although we know time with Jesus is important for us.

What our Lord said was more immediate, more surprising – “By trusting the unexpected, unearnable, grace of God as it flows to you, **you are now the salt of the earth, You are now the light of the world.**”

It is not our light but his light. Not by our strenuous efforts but by pure grace – as we give our lives over to our Lord Jesus Christ.

As Salt you are the flavour enhancer, the purification (salt was used as disinfectant) and you have worth (salt was so valued it was used as currency). As light you are to be seen, to conquer darkness, to be a guide and to bring life.

Some years ago I remember there were a number of reality television programmes based around the idea of sending a modern family back to pioneer days to see how they cope without all of our modern conveniences. How do you think you would get on?

You’d have no car, no computer, no washing machine, no electric cooker and no television. Just think for a moment how dependent we have become on electricity.

In the ancient world the only way to see after dark was to light a lamp.

And how would you cope without a fridge or freezer? You wouldn't be able to get all your milk and meat for the week ahead in just one go. It would never keep. And you'd have to be very careful about buying fish at all. In the ancient world the way to preserve meat and fish was to rub salt into it.

Salt and light made a big impact on the way life was lived. And Jesus uses both of them as metaphors for his followers. He told them, "You are like salt for everyone on earth... You are like light for the whole world." (Matthew 4.13–14 CEV)

Salt, to be effective, must be thoroughly mixed in to the thing it is to preserve.

Light, by contrast, cannot co-exist with darkness. For there to be light, the darkness must be dispelled.

To be salt we are to be totally involved in life of this world. To be light we must be separated and totally apart.

Now that's confusing – Is the church called to be culturally relevant, alongside people and identifying with where ordinary people stand... or are we called to be a new community, with different values, totally different and distinctive from the world in which we live?

The paradoxical answer of the gospel is that we are to be both. We are called to total involvement and total separation. We are to be salt and we are to be light. So...

Be salty

The Christmas before last we took the children to Timaru to go fishing off the wharf – Ron had fond memories of doing that at a child. Needless to say we didn't catch anything but we had a lot of fun. However there is a fish shop on the Timaru wharf so we bought fresh fish to take home – which was

put into a bag with a bag of ice –really important to keep it fresh and cool. The fishermen friends of Jesus had no ice box. They knew that the only way to get their fish to market without it going off was to pack it between layers of salt. The salt preserved it.

But salt, to be a preservative, must be thoroughly mixed in. The impact we have on the world will be determined by the contact that we have with the people who live in our community – the people we work with and mix with. **The challenge is for us to retain our ability to preserve and flavour the world by our presence.** Your different roles as people out in the community are vitally important. Our role as a church, alongside people is vital....

Remember Jesus prayed for us in John 17 – *“Father, I don’t ask you to take my followers out of the world, but keep them safe from the evil one.”* (John 17.15 CEV)

Be light

It is interesting that three times in the gospels Jesus is reported as saying, “I am the light of the world.” But here we are told, *“you are light for the whole world.”* So Jesus is telling us that we are to be like him. We are to aspire to what he is. In fact, as our light comes from him, what we are called to do is *to reflect his glory* (2 Corinthians 3.18).

As light we are to be seen. We put a street lamp on a lamppost so the light will spread as far as possible. You don’t turn a light on then cover it so it can be seen by no-one. The story is told that when Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy, he watched an old lamp lighter igniting lamps as he went down the street. Stevenson said to his nurse, *“I am watching a man put holes in the darkness.”* Likewise, John Ruskin watched a lamplighter light his lamps and said, *“Now that is what I mean by being a Christian. You ought to be able to see where he has been by the lights that he leaves burning behind him.”*

The point is that our Christian faith is meant to be seen. It should be visible to people.

And how is it to be visible?

According to Jesus by “the good that you do” (Matthew 5.16) Message Bible says. *16 Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.*

Jesus challenged the Pharisees, their requirement was keeping the law but Jesus knew that was impossible – only possible by the grace of God. Jesus requirement was to accept the free gift of love that God offers. Simply to come as you are. Just open the windows of your heart and life to the light and allow Jesus to touch even the dusty corners of your heart and soul. Then without any question, you will be the light of the world, you will become the salt of the earth.

The light of God is a gift: a gift to be lovingly accepted, celebrated, cherished and freely shared.

Did I overhear someone's thoughts just now? And did those thoughts have an exclamation mark? “I am not good enough, how can I fulfill this commission. If we are the light of the world, then things are grim! God must be desperate!”

By faith we open our hearts and lives to the grace of God – 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18 tells us ¹⁷ *This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!* ¹⁸ *And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. “*

I know that if some of you pause and think you could tell me instances when you have been salt and light even this past week – when you have lived Matthew 5:16 *16 Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand –*

shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

So this morning I offer the blessing of Christ's commission to all of us who know Him, this is our assignment our mission as Christian people.....
You are the salt of the earth..... You are the light of the world.

Live that way here amongst each other as church and then go out into the world and live that way. – Let us pray

Ask God: "Am I Your light?" Don't doubt, criticize or condemn yourself.
Just ask God and listen: "God am I a light? Please show me."
Ask, then be quiet. Be still. Listen for God's word for you today.

(silence for a minute)

If you sense God lighting you up inside. If you are hearing that you are a light, then thank God, and remember, that this is His work and it is marvellous in our eyes.

13 "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. **14** "Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. **15** If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. **16** Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. **17** "Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures - either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. **18** God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working. **19** "Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. **20** Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom.