

9 February 2020 'Salt and Light'.

Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus says, 'You are the salt of the earth.' Like so much of what Jesus said, this phrase has become embedded in the English language. Once again a testament to the influence and impact Jesus has had on the Western world. It is a great compliment to be told that you are 'the salt of the earth.' It means that you are seen as trustworthy and honest.

Interestingly, salt has played an important part in our history. Salt was prized in the ancient world for its utility, particularly as the primary preservative for meat, as well as a flavour-booster. It also made it possible to preserve dairy products such as butter and cheese that could be safely stored for far longer than milk in pre-refrigeration days.

Even more remarkably, salt, in some instances, has played a part in determining where societies settled. It has been suggested that people who sought meat and salt for their consumption followed animal trails to salt licks. Their trails became roads and beside the roads settlements grew which formed the basis for a village.

Without doubt today the real value in salt lies in its ability to add flavour to things. It brings out the best in food, it adds life to food. In the same way, Jesus is calling us to breathe life into the existence of others. Unfortunately, all too often, the perception is that Christianity does just the opposite. People see Christianity as taking the flavour out of life, as taking the joy out of life. And to be perfectly honest, there are grounds for that perception. All too often Christianity has been a vehicle for the passing of judgment; the focus has been on damnation if one transgresses. Don't do this, don't do that, and if you don't do it this way, God will not be happy.

Robert Louis Stevenson once recorded in his diary, as if he was recording something remarkable, *'I have been to church today, and I am not depressed.'* Paul tells us to *'always be full of the joy of the Lord,'* and he emphasises it by repeating it, *'I say it again – rejoice.'* Philippians 4:4. Let me remind you of the story I shared with you two years ago.

Dr Tony Campolo, American author and lecturer, was speaking at a Christian festival in Pennsylvania. The festival drew tens of thousands of young people and had a definite Pentecostal flavour to it (there is that word *flavour!*). The festival reached a crescendo on the Saturday night and word got around that he would be preaching at a nearby Lutheran church the next morning.

Hundreds of charged-up young people from the festival came to the Sunday service. Instead of the usual four to five hundred people, there well over a thousand packed into the auditorium and the balcony. This was a very 'high' church, balls and smalls and a lot of ritual.

The presiding minister took his place behind the pulpit and intoned in a sombre fashion, *'This is the day the Lord has made. Let us be glad in it. Let us enter his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise!'*

At that point, one of the young people in the balcony yelled out, *'All right!'* The rest of the young people started to clap and cheer. Tony Campolo said the reaction of the presiding minister was quite something to watch. The poor man just didn't know how to handle it. His knees actually buckled. The last thing in the world he expected when he called upon the congregation to *'make a joyful noise unto the Lord'* was that anyone actually would.

I refer you to the words in our first song – *Bring your laughter, raise your voice, to praise the one true God. We will make a joyful noise to praise the one true God.* The way you sang that, you actually meant it. Thank you! You brought flavour to our worship. If we are fulfil Jesus's statement that we are the salt of the earth, we must convey joy in our worship and probably more importantly, in our dealings with one another throughout the week.

In our gospel reading Jesus then goes on to say, *'You are the light of the world – like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see.'* Jesus, of course, referred to himself as *'the light of the world.'* *'But while I am still here in the world, I am the light of the world.'* John 9:5. So it's quite a compliment to have the same metaphor applied to us.

A light has a variety of functions. It can be a guide, it can warn, it can draw attention. However, it can literally light up a room or a darkened space. It is in this context that Jesus uses the metaphor of light, and he is referring not to a room but to people. There are dark places in everyone's lives and Jesus is telling us that as Christians we have a role to play in bringing some light into people's lives.

In this sense it is very similar to salt, which I guess is why Jesus included them together! Again and unfortunately, Christians are all too often seen as purveyors of doom and gloom, focusing on the negative. Jesus wants us to bring joy and happiness into people's lives, not despondency. So how can we do this?

Firstly, through our attitude and demeanour. If we can be cheerful and friendly in the company of others, that inevitably rubs off. You cannot help but lift the spirits of those around you.

Secondly, through our deeds, through what we do for others. The story of Sir Nicholas Winton, a British stockbroker, illustrates these truths about salt and light.

Winton was born in England in 1909, and baptised in the Anglican Church by grandparents of German Jewish descent. He grew up to be a stockbroker. In 1938 his friend asked Winton to visit Czechoslovakia as part of a British Committee for Refugees to Czechoslovakia.

As part of this trip he toured refugee camps. Winton was concerned that war was imminent and worried about the increasing violence towards the Jewish community. He was made aware of a Jewish agency in Britain which helped rescue 10,000 Jewish children.

Winton decided to start a relief effort of his own which would require raising 50 pounds per child to be paid to the British government just for transport. He also worked to raise other necessary funds and find foster homes for each child. Through it all he kept his job as a stockbroker by day and worked on his relief efforts by night.

In total it is believed that he saved 669 children. Winton never spoke a word about his efforts. It wasn't until his wife found a scrapbook in the attic 50 years later that he began to speak publicly about his story. In recent years he was reunited with some of his children and the 6,000 members of his 'extended family.' He was knighted in 2003 and died in 2015 at the ripe old age of 106.

What Winton did was heroic and it's something we will probably never have the opportunity to do. But that doesn't mean we cannot be salt and light. Winton didn't have any outstanding skills. He had a love for God which inspired him to do what he could to bring some light and happiness into the lives of those who badly needed it. There is no reason why we cannot do the same, albeit perhaps on a different scale.

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