

Sermon 8 February 2026 Salt and Light

Philippians 4:4-7 Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus says, ‘*You are the salt of the earth.*’ Matthew 5:13. 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 benefits, 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 stored for far longer than milk in pre-refrigeration days.

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. Some people see Christianity as taking the flavour out of life, as taking the joy out of life. And to be perfectly honest, there are some grounds for that perception. All too often Christianity has been the 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.*’ In our first reading, Paul tells us to, ‘*Always be full of joy in the Lord,*’ and he emphasises it by repeating it, ‘*I say it again – rejoice.*’ Philippians 4:4.

I just have to repeat the story about Dr Tony Campolo, American author and lecturer, who was speaking at a Christian festival in Pennsylvania. The festival drew thousands of young people and had a definite Pentecostal flavour to it (there is that word *flavour* again!). 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 couple of hundred, there were over a thousand packed into the auditorium and the balcony. This was a very ‘high’ church with bells and smells 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, ‘Alright!’ 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.

Speaking of making a joyful noise unto the Lord, I want to commend you on your singing. Thank you! You bring flavour to our worship. If we are to fulfil Jesus’ 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 goes on to say, ‘*You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.*’ Matthew 5:14. 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 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, all too often Christians are 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, and we have talked about this before, 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. He grew up to be a stockbroker. In 1938 his friend asked Winton to visit Czechoslovakia as part of a British Committee for Refugees for 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 670 children. Winton never spoke a word about his efforts. It wasn't until his wife found a scrapbook in the attic many years later that he began to speak publicly about his story. Some years ago 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 probably something the like of which we will 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.

I want to finish by saying a few words in acknowledging Waitangi Day, which of course, was celebrated on Friday. Waitangi Day is a day when many New Zealanders head off again to the beach, the golf course, or just take a breather from their exertions in getting another year under way after a few weeks of inertia and indulgence. But for many, it is a day to reflect on our history and, more specifically, the role of the Maori culture in that history, and in fact, in the culture of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Some may argue that the Treaty of Waitangi is out of date, is history. I would make two points in response to that. Firstly, history is very important. It is very much part of who we are today. Secondly, the Ten Commandments were a covenant between God and the Jewish people, a covenant which we inherited and a covenant which was made just a year or two before the Treaty of Waitangi. In other words, they are a part of our history. The values as expressed in the Ten Commandments are still valid today and form the basis of our Christian religion. The values embodied in the Treaty are good and still valid today. They are about respecting the rights and the differences of the individual. That is so very relevant for us today.

We live in a multi-cultural society. Look at our congregation here today. There are so many cultures present here, and we are the richer for it. However, there is a very important difference between the Maori culture and all other cultures represented here today and in our community beyond and that is that Aotearoa is the home of the Maori culture. It is the birthplace and the domicile of the Maori culture. You don't have to travel very far to encounter a Maori placename. That is why the nurture and the preservation of the Maori culture is so very important to us all as New Zealanders.

Ma te Atua koutou katoa e manaaki. May God bless you all.