

Salt and Light

Isaiah 58:6-12; Matthew 5:12-20

If only there was a strong news-item from the past few days around which to hang a sermon... If you didn't laugh you would cry at the relentless bad news of recent weeks. Even given a general media obsession with the promotion of bad news stories, in truth journalists have not had to do much in-depth research to present stories that have embroiled in scandal and disgrace politicians from most if not all parties in the UK, the President of the United States and other prominent Americans, former members of the Royal Family, leaders of industries and on and on. Yes we know there are still good people out there in the world, and yes some news outlets struggle manfully to ensure that little slivers of good news filter onto screen and newsprint, but it's been grimness on grimness for weeks on end. And with little sight of it concluding.

And it's been raining forever.

Speaking to you, and to people around the community and beyond, the pervasive gloom of these days eats into the joy of living. Is there ever going to be good news? Where have all the good people gone? Will the sun ever shine again?

Having finished teaching His gritty blessings, the beatitudes, Jesus calls His disciples to be salt for the earth and light to the world. Salt appears quite frequently in the Old Testament, while light is a pervasive symbol throughout the world's religions. Alongside Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism all use the image of light in their teachings and rituals.

The effective work of salt, like yeast, is both hidden and out of all proportion to its small size. It works unseen to give taste and to preserve. But it can lose its savour and become useless. To be salt to the earth suggests being close to the ground and that those people who are to be the 'salt

of the earth' are called to be humble as well as sometimes hidden in their work. Remaining salty, keeping savour depends on how the Christian uses the resources of faith and prayer to remain obedient to the teaching and the practice of Jesus. It's worth noting that Jesus says: "You **are** the salt". Being salt isn't a demand, it is simply part of being called to be a Christian, something which permeates everything that we say and think and do, and in the doing, we bring something distinctive to the world.ⁱ

There is a remarkable scene in the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible where Jesus is standing and knocking at the door of the Church. You might know the picture by Holman Hunt of Christ as the Light of the World. The idea is whether or not Christians will accept or reject Jesus by opening the door or not. But one commentator suggests this may miss an important point. Prior to the scene at the door one of the early churches, in Laodicea, is rebuked for being neither hot nor cold but lukewarm. A church that is judged not to have any flavour but is anodyne and bland, saying little, doing less to demonstrate what it believes.ⁱⁱ

To say that Christians are to be the salt of the earth implies that they are to bring some 'flavour' to their relationships with each other and to their impact on the world in which they live and operate. 'Salt has an edge as well as a satisfying taste. It makes come alive what would otherwise seem tasteless and bland. Salt can sometimes be used to preserve food and keep it fresh. Salt can be used to stimulate thirst.ⁱⁱⁱ Human history has long been shaped by salt, from trade routes to government monopolies to popular protests, like that of Gandhi's "Salt March" in India in 1930 when he challenged the British monopoly of salt in the Raj.^{iv} The word 'salary derives from a Latin term for a soldier's allowance for the purchase of salt.

Of course, too much salt can cause harm, but I rather suspect most of us are more likely not to be Christian enough than too Christian. Nevertheless it's a caution to us to be aware of death by metaphor. Get the idea, the sense of what Jesus says, don't slavishly apply it to the nth degree.

Jesus also says that we are to be 'light'. Light is visible and makes other things visible; more than that light is inseparable from sight, growth and indeed life itself. It is so vital to life that it is no accident that the Genesis poetry trying to imagine the shaping of creation starts by telling us that light was the first of God's actions in the work of shaping the world. The Bible is full of references to God being light, and to Jesus being the light of the world. The surprise in what Jesus says here in the Sermon on the Mount is that you and I - very ordinary Christians - are light to the world too!^v

"Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven."^{vi} That light is not to be hidden, it is to be brought out into the open, to reveal, to warm, to challenge the darkness. In order for the light to be seen Christian people, and other people of good heart and faith, must be willing to go where darkness exists, to engage and walk through it, so that, in time, light can overcome it. "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is necessary."^{vii} If we are to be the light of Jesus in the world we must go into some dark places. The light is not given for our own personal enjoyment.

The Anglican theologian and pastor John Stott has said, "We should not ask, 'What is wrong with the world?' for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather we should ask, 'What has happened to salt and light?'"

I like that. Don't look at the world and decry it's broken, soiled awfulness in sing-song voices of disaster and weariness. We know how terrible things are. But rather, look at the world and wonder

what has happened to the salt and light. What has happened to nations, to political parties, to industries and businesses, to legal and educational establishments, to churches and charities, that have become flavourless and lost their purpose; that have journeyed by default or design into dark and shadowy places, and done harm and not good? For greed; for gain; for power. Not just big things, but those little casual cruelties and acts of thoughtlessness that do harm to good causes, and kind individuals, and innocent victims, and gentle souls.

Of course, it's not simply organisations and faceless bodies, it is people: individuals, women and men, who behave and believe that somehow they are beyond the normal moral code, that they are not bound by common decencies and behaviours. Who think integrity is only necessary when they're visible and therefore accountable. Who cover up, or lie, or ignore, then cut the corner, look after their own needs first, don't worry too much about the inconvenient others who are in the way.

I don't need to name names from the news in recent weeks, the people and the organisations. There is no pleasure in that, and in fact it might actually be a deflection and distraction.

Because it is not only about 'them'; it can sometimes be 'us'. Our names may not be in the Epstein Files, or appear in newspaper columns and court cases, or be subject to door-stepping journalists asking the kind of questions that make us wonder in fear, "How did they find out?" Our dark secrets and bad behaviours may be tawdry and petty in comparison, but we know they are also far from right, and not the evidence of Christ within us that we aspire toward.

"We should not ask, 'What is wrong with the world?' for that diagnosis has already been given. Rather we should ask, 'What has happened to salt and light?'"

Here's the good news. Today Jesus Christ not only invites you to review the inner landscape of your life: the bland, anodyne faith; the shady, darkened corners of what you are. Today Jesus Christ

invites you to take the salt of faith and revitalise your ethical life. Your function is to add zest to the life of the world where you live. Your function is to shine in dark places, sad places, angry places, grim places, so that light, and not darkness, will win the day. And me too.

When we are salt and light for others, and for ourselves, we are more likely to fulfil the law that Jesus taught. What did He say? Love the Lord our God with all your heart, mind and soul; and your neighbour as ourselves. Well then. Salt and light. Today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *'But I say to you,'* pps63-64

ⁱⁱ Charles James Cook, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 1*, p332

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid* pps332-332

^{iv} Matthew Myer Boulton, *Feasting on the Word, Matthew, Vol 1*, p82

^v Fisher, p64

^{vi} *Book of Common Prayer Collect*

^{vii} Annie Dillard, *'Teaching a Stone to Talk,'* p43