



Salt and light – heaven on earth

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Isaiah 58:1-9a

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

Sometimes I wonder if we make the gospel too complicated. I remember once having coffee with a friend from a different denomination and discussing a particular issue facing the church. At one point she said to me a bit impatiently: “The gospel is simple. Don’t make it so complicated. We’re meant to love and follow Jesus. Full stop.”

In some ways I think she’s right. The heart of our calling is clear. As Jesus himself shared in the summary of the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first commandment and a second is this: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

But in reality, we know that the choices we face are not always clear cut – the people that Jesus loved might not be the people we want to love, and who is our neighbour anyway? Sometimes there seems to be a frustrating amount of “grey” that seems to blur the black and white that would make our lives and the choices we face a lot simpler.

Today’s gospel is one of those passages that has a simple message, but I wonder if there is more to it than we may think. Listen again:

“ ‘You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? ... ‘You are light for all the world. A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under a bowl, but on the lampstand, where it gives light to everyone in the house’...”

What strikes you, listening again to Jesus’ words? Think about the tense Jesus uses

Jesus isn’t saying, “*You should be* the salt of the earth and light of the world.” Or, “*You have to be,...*”, “*You better be,....*” Rather, Jesus is blessing his disciples and saying, you *are*. As in *already are*. Even if you don’t know it. Even if you once knew it and forgot. Even if you have a hard time believing it.

I invite you take a moment and think about the last week or two. Think about the ways in which God has used you to be salt and light... for example, your words of encouragement to others; your faithful work at your place of employment; the volunteering you’ve done; the prayers you’ve offered; or the promises you’ve made and kept...

Maybe these things seem small. Maybe they seem to be things you just do, maybe they don’t seem like momentous “salt and light” opportunities. Think again. Those things, done with love and care and humility are the things that Jesus is talking about. He is encouraging his disciples to realise that they are already blessed and equipped to be salt and light. And don’t forget, “small” is what God most often uses to change the world.

If ever there was a time when we need to be blessed with the gifts of salt and light, and use them, it’s right now. There seems to be a pervasive sense of dis-ease in our world. All the more reason for us to be the salt and light that Jesus says we already are.

Simple. Perhaps. But that doesn't mean it's easy.

It's not easy because being salt and light to others means letting go of ourselves, letting go of our own agenda, our own sense of achievement, our own pride.

You may have heard of the book called *Markings*, by Dag Hammarskjöld, Swedish diplomat, economist, author, and Secretary-General of the United Nations. *Markings* was published after his death. He left a note which was found after he died that said this about his personal diary entries: “... *If you find them worth publishing, you have my permission to do so – [they concern] my negotiations with myself – and with God*”.

In one of the entries, from 1956, he says this:

Hallowed be thy name,
 not mine,
Thy kingdom come,
 not mine,
Thy will be done,
 not mine,
Give us peace with Thee
 Peace with men
 Peace with ourselves,
And free us from all fear.¹

There is a risk that the prayers we pray or sing most often can lose their impact. Here we are reminded that the Lord's Prayer, which we pray here every week, is about *God's* name, *God's* kingdom, and *God's* will. We cooperate, we join in. But to be salt and light it's not actually about us. It's about God. Today's gospel reading puts it like this:

¹ *Markings*, p 142, Vintage Spiritual Classics edition, October 2006.

*“Like the lamp you must shed light among your fellows, so that when they see the good you do, **they may give praise to your Father in heaven**”.*

Being salt and light in the world is a way that we encourage others to meet God, to get a glimpse of God’s kingdom. We make heaven visible. Each of us has the power to create heaven on earth. When Jesus said to his disciples: “you are salt to the world”, and “you are light for the world”, he was confident that his disciples, having been given the gift of God-light, had the ability to share that light with others.

Later in our worship today we will hear and respond to the familiar words sending us out to love and serve the Lord. It seems like a simple, uncomplicated message, and in one sense it is: we must never forget that being re-energised to go to love and serve the Lord is one of the most important reasons for gathering to worship in the first place. But when you hear that invitation today I invite you to take some time to ponder those words a bit more deeply. Ask yourself two questions:

What specific actions can I take this week to be salt and light at home, at work, among my neighbours?

How will my actions help others to bring glory to God – to encourage them to give praise to our Father in heaven?

That is the real challenge. Because it’s not about us, our sense of doing good, or our sense of achievement, but about whether we are helping and enabling others to be open to God working in their lives.

Let us pray:

God, you are the first light cutting through the void.
You are the final light which we shall enjoy forever.
Help us to welcome the light, walk in the light,
and shed that light, so all may know its true source.
(ANZPB p597, adapted)

Amen.