

Sermon 17.2.08

‘Salt of the earth – Light of the world’

Bible Reading: Matthew 5: 13-20

Salt of the earth – Light of the world. That is how Jesus describes the identity of his followers. How are you being salt? How are you being light? Have you become a little ‘unsalted’? Has your light gone out or grown dim?

We could also ask those questions of the church. How is this church being salt and light to the world?

We’ll come back to those questions later. You may have gathered that the theme this morning is ‘Salt of the earth – light of the world’.

In a report about some remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory where there are situations of desperate need, a Christian worker from the area said, ‘Satan detests the Aboriginal church because it is growing through the cracks in his asphalt.’ In referring to the chaotic social situation, he said, ‘You can’t run Bible studies, you can’t do translation work. All the Christian life becomes in this context is being ‘salt and light’.’

With prayer and action, our hope is that the apology delivered by Prime Minister Mr. Rudd last Wednesday to the stolen generations will create a space for healing and moving on with appropriate responses. We are so used to criticising politicians when they don’t meet our expectations. What we witnessed and heard on Wednesday came from a man who, it is reported, visited an indigenous family last weekend and heard their stories of their past, went to church on Sunday and then went home to write the speech of apology.

I have written a letter of thanks to the Prime Minister, affirming the action he took in making the apology, and encouraging him and the Opposition Leader, Mr. Nelson, to cement the apology in actions that will change the future for indigenous Australians, particularly the young generation of children and teenagers, so that they can grow up proud of their culture, and able to make positive contributions to a reconciled Australia. If you would like to add your support, the letter is available for you to read and to sign.

This is about recognising ‘salt and light’ actions, that help to express God’s love and justice in concrete situations.

This church, celebrating its 120 years of history, has a heritage of being salt and light. If we think back on the past decade, the offering of Emergency Relief from this place, and the Opportunity Shop did much to spread salt and light through the community. It’s happening now through Helping Hand Café – 2 weeks in the last month we have seen over 40 people come on a Tuesday. Last week a number of people sat around the tables talking after lunch, instead of eating their meal and leaving straight away. That’s what it’s about – building relationships.

Many of you, I know, incorporate what we might call ‘random acts of kindness’ into your everyday life, and you do it without even realising that you are being salt and light. Today we are going to hear about a new ministry activity of the church that will commence shortly. It’s an example of a ‘salt and light’ ministry.

Note: An interview took place with the person who has developed an Adult Literacy program for disadvantaged people in the community. It will be called ‘Helping Hand Learning’. The church prayed for this new ministry outreach.

We are all familiar with salt and light. They are two of the commonest household necessities, so basic and essential to human life, even though we are encouraged for our health to watch our intake of salt. Everybody used them in the Palestine of Jesus’ day. He will have known them from boyhood, and often watched his mother use salt in the kitchen. In those days before refrigeration, salt was used not so much for flavouring as for preservative and antiseptic purposes. So Mary will have put salt on the fish and have rubbed it into the meat, or left them to soak in salty water. And she will have lit the oil lamps when the sun went down.

These are the images which Jesus chose to indicate the impact he intended his followers to exert in the world. The images of salt and light are not only about impact, but also about our identity. Not only what we do – but who we are.

What do you think? I want to know what you think about this passage. Talk to one another about it – just where you are for a couple of minutes. What do you think Jesus meant when he said ‘You are the salt of the earth – You are the light of the world?’ Seer if you can think of an example of being salt and light.

Note: After several minutes of discussion, people shared their responses with the whole congregation.

This is about our relationship to the world around us. How we are to live our lives out in the world, in our schools, in our places of employment, in our neighbourhoods, in our circle of friends. Like salt, there is a flavour that you can bring to all of your dealings with others. Another use of salt in Jesus’ culture may have been in his mind when he used this illustration. Sacrifices were accompanied with salt, described as ‘the salt of the covenant of God’. *Leviticus 2: 13* The salt of the covenant was a symbol of faithfulness. That is our call too, to be faithful and willing to live a lifestyle that is centred on Jesus and focused on others.

Like salt, Christians may seem small and insignificant, even powerless. Yet, you do not need a lot of salt to make a difference to a meal. Its properties far exceed its value and the amount used. The preserving qualities of salt remind us that society, if left to itself, without the influence of the gospel, will rot and deteriorate. The church is to stand against the prevailing moral and ethical decay, against injustice, against the dehumanising forces that squeeze the life out of people. We are to speak out when necessary, always remembering that ‘The good word without the good walk is of no value.’ (*Stier*)

Most of Israel’s salt supply came from the Dead Sea but because of its impurities, it could easily lose its taste. It was also a highly traded commodity and it was common

for unscrupulous traders to mix it with white sand in bulk sales. That's where the saying came from, 'He's not worth his salt', referring to an unscrupulous trader.

Are we worth our salt? We are salt when we convey both truth and grace, with integrity, to a world that is wary of hypocrites and religious piety. To make sure of this, we need to open our lives every day to the impact of Scripture, prayer and allowing our lives to be flooded with the love of God.

On Friday I conducted the funeral of a 95-year-old mother of a friend. She was not a regular church-goer, but a very lovely, kind lady. As I was preparing for the funeral, I wondered how to weave in appropriate words that would help people in their own experience to connect in some way with God. I felt very strongly that God was moving me to simply tell people that he loved them and that he loved the deceased person. So I did that.

I said, 'You may not think about God very often. But you know, he loves you – he loves each one of you, as he loved the person we are remembering today. How can he not love that which he created? So we can leave our loved one and friend safely within his love.'

I am coming more and more to the conviction that this is what people need to know and experience – that Jesus loves them. This is what will make a difference in their lives. After the funeral, someone approached me for a conversation. He said, 'That word about love got through to people, much more than telling them that they might go to hell.'

There is a time and place to talk about evil and the consequences of choosing to reject Christ. But we have to be sensitive to the moment, and to the Holy Spirit's leading on that. The funeral would not have been the sensitive moment.

The love of Jesus – expressed through us being salt and light. The love of Jesus – softens hearts, heals wounds, brings about justice, lights up the darkness.

The Lighthouse banner hangs on the wall before us today. Look at it – the light in the storms of life. The light in the darkness. The light that shows the way. The light that cannot be locked up in the church when we all go home today. You are the light – not of the church, but of the world. You are the salt – not of the church, but of the earth. Go out and be the hands and feet of Jesus, and he will help you be salt and light spread throughout the world. And remember – Jesus loves you.

Lynette Leach