

Sunday 9th February, 2014

Rev'd Margaret Middleton

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth"

Today's reading forms part of what is traditionally called Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Last Sunday we read and thought about the Beatitudes, the opening part. We tend to think this so called 'sermon' was delivered by Jesus one memorable afternoon to a large crowd of people gathered on a hillside. Perhaps. Perhaps the various teachings were gathered together and presented by Matthew, a manner reminiscent of Moses giving the law.

More importantly, we need to keep in mind those who were listening to Jesus. He was talking to the least important people in the eyes of the powerful political rulers and the religious elite. He calls them "blessed" which means they are special to God. Now he tells them they are salt and light. Who then are the "salt of the earth"? They are the humble, those who mourn, the meek and those who thirst after doing what is right in the world. Who are "the light"? They are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who receive abuse for standing up for what is right..

He calls them salt and light. What would these images have meant to those who were listening to him?

Salt. You wouldn't think there is much to know about salt but it seems there is. In fact, it seems that one can write a whole history of the world just by tracing what has happened with salt. Wars have been won and lost on the basis of who has control of the stores of salt.

Governments have found salt to be a lucrative means of raising money -- by controlling and taxing it.

At different points in history, salt has been the currency of commerce. The word 'salary' has its Latin roots in the sense that the worker was paid in order to be able to 'buy salt.'

Evidently, until a hundred years ago, salt was scarce. And in the time of Jesus and long before that and ever since, salt was necessary for the preservation of food. Having it or not having it was the difference between life and death.

Besides flavouring our food, salt has thousands of other purposes. It softens water, melts the ice on a frozen footpath, and when gargled with can soothe a sore throat, to name just a few.

Normally speaking we don't question the availability of salt.

But this would not have been the case when Jesus preached so long ago. And so it matters that Jesus says to those who were listening then and to those who listen still: "You are the salt of the earth."

And as far as I am aware of, in spite of Jesus' assertion today, salt never actually loses its taste. Salt is only 'useless' when it is not used.

"You are the salt of the earth." Salt simply does what salt does. It preserves and brings healing and provides safety and offers just enough flavour.

What does it mean to be salt? Here is one example. Let me quote from a reply written by a police officer in response to a letter she had received which spoke of her heroism in breaking wide open a ring of corruption in the Police Department... putting her life at risk.

"My Dear Mr Hunt,

You simply can't imagine how much I appreciate receiving your letter. It came at a time in my life when I truly needed something to uplift my spirits.... You said in your letter that I have courage and strength. I don't know if I have those attributes, but I do have a concept that police officers are not above the law. ... My husband and I have suffered a great deal because of my stand on corruption, but when I see how proud he is of me and when I receive letters such as yours, I know that I did what was right and I have no regrets. God bless you for having the courage and initiative to write to me and let me know that someone cared. Thank you very much, Cynthia A. White."

I don't know if Officer White ever fully accepted the truth that she was a person of courage and strength, but it had to make a difference that someone else recognized it and named it.

You are salt. You are a person of principle and integrity. You are courageous. You are strong. Being told it is so may just be the beginning of it being so -- or of it continuing to be so, don't you think?

"You are the salt of the earth."

Our words can heal or hurt, our attitudes can be uplifting or down putting, our actions can destroy or preserve. It doesn't take much, but it can make a world of difference to someone else.

"You are the salt of the earth." Believe it.

Jesus says these words to you today. You are of great value. Who and what you are and all that you give to the world makes the world a better, richer place. All

you have to do is get out of the shaker, out of the bag, and do what you were made to be and do.

The other image Jesus uses is light. "You are the light of the world."

It is more usual to think of Jesus as the Light of the world, but here he says "You are the light of the world."

As with the image or metaphor of salt we need to think consider how those to whom this was addressed would have heard it.

For us in a post –Edisonian world, it seems we can control light. We understand it. It really is of little concern for us. Flick a switch, the light comes on. We are not at the mercy of wherever the sun happens to be. Nor will an eclipse bring terror to our hearts. For most of human history this has not been so. Light in Jesus day was precious. A flickering flame could dispel the darkness of night and because it was so precious it was never taken for granted. It was used only sparingly to show the way or cook a meal. A world without light was, and still is a scary place.

Like salt, light does not exist for itself. It has a purpose.

Jesus says: You are the light of the world. Your life in the Kingdom can make a difference for others. In other words, just as for salt, you are of great value and your light, your words, your actions can make a difference.

All those great figures of history who have been shining lights – shining light on injustice or lighting up the lives of others with their love and compassion, were those who simply could not be silent.

Last Saturday I saw the film adaptation of "The Book Thief." The setting Nazi Germany with its terror, horrors and depravation. It is the story of a young girl's journey through childhood to young adulthood as she finds and experiences compassion, courage and love. In one scene, the local Jewish folk of a German Village are rounded up and marched through the streets on their way to a death camp. Her adopted father watches the slow, shuffling figures passing by, heads down, dejected, humiliated. When he sees his neighbour in the line, a man he had gone to school with and worked with, he rushes up to a German officer and shouts at him: "What has he done? He is a good man."

Those few words were a spotlight on the injustice, the inhumanity, the cruelty of what was happening.

Can you hear Jesus saying to you and to me: "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world."

Question is, have we lost our saltiness? Are we hiding our light under a bushel perhaps of fear or apathy? I believe we should hear these words both as individuals and as the gathered people of God. So the challenge for us today is very clear. Where does the world need salt and light right now? How can we, through following Jesus, provide it?

These words of Jesus were meant to be words of great encouragement to those who needed to hear it the most. We still need the encouragement but let's not ignore the challenge.

A grain of salt can make a difference, the tiniest flicker of light can light up the darkest corner.

May we have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to respond for the sake of the Kingdom of God.