



Sermon: - 5th February 2017

You are the salt of the earth

Isaiah 58: 1-12; Matthew 5 : 13 - 20

“You are the salt of the earth!” Jesus was a great teacher; he used things that were familiar to his audience to make his point. And in this instance today he takes as a metaphor common, familiar salt. Even today if I said to you, “she is the salt of the earth!” you would immediately know the kind of person I was talking about. It’s a saying that describes basic goodness. We immediately know that this is a person who can be relied upon, someone trustworthy and dependable. It’s a compliment and I think we would all like to be described as the salt of the earth. But this saying has many implications; when Jesus compared his disciples to salt he knew he was doing. There are many angles to this metaphor; it is rich in meaning. Nowadays we are constantly being told that we have too much salt in our diet, but that is not because it isn’t good for us. It’s because the modern diet relies too much on processed food which contains too much salt. It would be foolish to give up salt completely – we need it. It’s essential to life and to well-being. And through the centuries it has had many purposes. As well as giving flavour, it stops things from going bad. Before refrigeration many foods, such as fish and meat were salted to preserve them. In the ancient world it was so precious that it was used as currency, and we still speak of people being ‘worth their salt’; Roman soldiers were paid in salt and our word ‘salary’ comes from the Latin for salt – sale. Perhaps because it was used as currency, it was also used to designate status, so you were above or below the salt depending on your station in life. If you ate someone’s food, shared salt with them, you were bound to friendship. I am sure you are all aware that the reason the massacre of Glencoe was such a scandal was not because of the number of people who were killed, but because the Campbells slaughtered their hosts, the MacDonalds, who had offered them hospitality; food, drink and accommodation. The Campbells had eaten the MacDonald’s salt, and that made the betrayal all the worse.

Salt is precious and significant. And so if we are like salt, we also are precious and significant. In comparing us to salt Jesus is telling us that we, his followers, can have a powerful and positive influence in the world; like salt that preserves, that flavours, that is valuable, that makes a difference.

But if we think back to last week and the Sermon on the Mount, which comes immediately before today's passages, it might cast some doubt in our minds. How can the people described in the Beatitudes have any kind of influence in this hard, tough world? Can the poor and the meek change things when the way our world works is decided by the rich and powerful? How can the mourners or the merciful do any lasting good? Will they not simply be overwhelmed by the floodtide of evil? Are not such people too feeble to achieve anything especially if they are a small minority in the world? I guess at the moment, with dreadful events a regular feature of news programmes; the recent violence and political turmoil in Ukraine, the machete attack in Paris, the horrendous attacks on women and children by security forces in Myanmar in Africa, it seems particularly hopeless. But what can we do, how can we have any influence, how can we be salt in these circumstances?

Yet Jesus says to us, you are the salt of the earth!

And as if this isn't enough, Jesus also calls us light for the world. This sounds a bit daunting to me. Elsewhere he calls himself the light of the world. Does he mean that we are like him? Can he really mean that? In a sense he does, but how can we be like Jesus? The words of Isaiah give us a clue when God speaks of the true fasting that he chooses being to loose the bonds of injustice, to free the oppressed, to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, house the homeless. Then – says the prophet – your light shall break forth like the dawn!' Jesus said 'You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' But how do we do that?

One wet foggy night a man called Percy Shaw set out to travel from Bradford to Halifax. It was a potentially dangerous road, twisting and turning with some very sharp corners and a sheer drop down a hillside to the right of the road. The two towns had trams which travelled between them, and motorists were in the habit of following the tramlines reflected in their headlights to guide them in the dark. On this particular night, Percy Shaw was alarmed to find that the tram lines had been lifted and removed and so he found himself driving without the usual guidelines on this dark and misty night. He was driving very cautiously when suddenly he saw in front of him two small bright shining lights in the fog.

When he got closer he realised that the pin-points of light were simply the eyes of a cat sitting on a fence by the road-side but he realised that without those glowing eyes to warn him he might have driven into the fence. And so was born the humble cat's-eye, guiding motorists in safety however dark or misty the night might be. The interesting thing about

this story from our perspective is that the cat's eye that enables us to drive safely in darkness actually has no light of its own. It simply reflects the headlights of the car. In the same way, we are lights of the world, but in fact we have no light of our own. We simply reflect the light of God back into the world so that others may travel in safety. Christ is the Light; we will shine with reflected light if we walk in his light.

Salt and light represent two staples of life. Pliny once said that there was nothing more useful than salt and sunshine 'sale et sole', or salt and light! We cannot live without light and we cannot live without salt. Jesus says we are salt and light. So what he's saying is that the world needs us. We make a difference because we ARE different. We reflect the light of Christ into the world and we flavour the world with the love of God. We are important to the life of the world and to some extent we make a difference just by being here. The world is a different place because of the presence of Christ's followers. I think in a sense the world is preserved, saved, because of the presence of Christians, bringing the light, reflecting the love of God back into the world. And through this, through our presence in the world, through the reflected light of Christ which we bring, God is glorified, and the world is never without his presence, his light. Because we are here. Because you are here. The salt of the earth, light for the world.

But what does that mean in practice? It's all very well to say that we make a difference just by being here, but surely Jesus meant more than that! Well, for one thing he said that we have to remain salty, in other words as long as we keep our faith, then we can preserve the world from the decay that always threatens to destroy it. And as a community of faith, and as people on the way of Jesus, we can prevent that decay through our presence and our prayers, our witness and our words, our care and concern. The attitudes we display, the welcome that we show to people when they come to join with us, whether it's on a Sunday or at other times. This welcome has been remarked upon, you are good at welcoming people; your light shines. The prayers that are said in this fellowship not only for this fellowship but for people far and wide, through the monthly prayer breakfasts, but especially through the prayer circle! What a wonderful ministry, holding people who need it in prayer every day! You are the salt of the earth! The Rainbow Cafe which every month provides food and fellowship for anyone who cares to come through the doors! You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! The Acts of Random Kindness which are taking salt and light out of our doors into our community. Because salt is no good if it

stays in the salt cellar; light is no good if we hide it under a basket! And in taking our care and our concerns and our prayers and our Christ-like attitudes out into the community we are being salt and light. And the encouraging thing is that it is not huge quantities of salt that are required; but a relatively small amount can transform and can preserve a great quantity of food. One small light can pierce the darkness... and darkness can never overcome a light that goes on shining. We don't have to do big things to make a difference. We just have to be ourselves, love the Lord, keep our faith, and be ready to do what little things we can, welcoming the stranger, showing little the acts of kindness, to make all the difference in the world! You are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! Go forth and shine!