

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13–16

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In your series, A Church For Others, Deo has asked me to speak on ‘Salt and Light’. As we had them read this morning, in consecutive verses, 13 and 14 of Matthew 5, straight after the Beatitudes, Jesus told his disciples – and so he’s telling us, “You are the salt of the earth, ...you are the light of the world.” And immediately there is something that stands out here. Jesus didn’t say, “I will make you effective like salt or noticeable like a light”, but “You *are* the salt of the earth, ...you *are* the light of the world.”

Clearly, you are neither of those things and yet, you are *both* of those things. Literally, you are neither of them, salt nor light, but more than figuratively or symbolically, if you belong to Christ, you *are* both of them.

Let’s look at ‘salt’, then. From ancient times, humanity has used salt for two main reasons, as a preserver and as an enhancer. Meats and other things immersed in salt or a saline solution have been preserved to provide food that keeps. Unless you were an Eskimo, refrigeration and freezing are relatively recent practices.

And who hasn’t made a tasteless meal tasty with a sprinkle of salt.

So, when Jesus called his followers the salt of the earth, he must have had in mind at least these two qualities. First was their – or our – capacity to preserve a community. Perhaps an example we may not think about was when Abraham pleaded for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Because his nephew lived in Sodom, Abraham asked, If there were 50 righteous men in that city, would the Lord destroy it? 50 righteous persons were sufficient to preserve those wicked towns from judgment. Worried that there might not be a whole 50 righteous folk in that city, Abraham whittled it down from 50 to 45 to 40 to 30 to 20 to 10 and yes, even 10 righteous persons would have saved those cities from destruction. Sadly, the only righteous man, Lot, was removed.

Of course, that’s a very literal application of what Jesus said. If I might say it carefully, how much more righteous – or how much more salty – are we of the New Testament, of the new covenant, who know Jesus Christ and have not only been let in on God’s great plan of redemption but have been caught up in it and

been made recipients of the Holy Spirit so that we share the very life of God. How much more should our influence on a community bring wisdom and life, even to those who have no appreciation of faith. Salt, by the way, does sometimes refer to wisdom.

That's preserving, what about enhancing the life of a community? How many times do you hear of people being converted because they observed a Christian – whether known to them or not – and decided that whatever it was that that person had, they wanted it. Listen to this in Acts 5:12-14:

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico [a covered part of the temple court]. None of the rest [i.e., unbelievers] dared join them, but the people [even the unbelievers] held them in high honor. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women...

The believers were being salt in their community. The Church was a dynamic, loving community within the broader community. So much so that the rest of the community couldn't help but notice them. As a result, they honored them, but they also knew that they were not part of them and they were reluctant to join them. And yet, day by day, the Lord opened the eyes of those who looked on and opened their hearts to see that there was a life amongst them that they didn't know. He gave them a hunger for it and so brought them to faith.

Remember that the natural position of the human heart is one of hostility towards God and his people. So it was a big move from being hostile to them to joining them in their faith. But it was seeing their life, it was getting a taste of their salt, if you like, which drew them to want what they had. This was the Lord's work, he had to make them receptive to it and he did. Luke speaks of the very earliest Church in these terms in Acts 2:46-47:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. [*What were they doing? Well they were just being the salt that they were and the rest of the community could not help but see it – especially with God enabling them to see it*]. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The believers didn't have to try to be salt, they were so moved by the grace of God that they couldn't help being it. And the effect was that God used them to draw others into the kingdom. Is that the way it is for us? Are the wonder of

salvation, the joy of forgiveness and the fruit of the Spirit sufficiently evident in our lives that they mark us out from others? May the Lord make it so if it isn't already.

If I may use that as a segue into our other theme, light, it's surely those things – the wonder of salvation, the joy of forgiveness and the fruit of the Spirit – that make us stand out like a lamp on a stand in a world of darkness. As Jesus put it in our gospel reading: "People don't light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house."

As with the salt, Jesus said we *are* the light of the world. Now light in the Bible, more than anything else, represents God's being and, more specifically, his holiness. So John tells in his first epistle:

...God is light and in him is no darkness at all. (1 Jn 1:5)

In First Timothy, Paul speaks of God '...who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light' (1 Tim 6:16). No doubt Walter Chalmers Smith had that verse in mind as he wrote the first hymn that we sang,

'Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes'

And there is no darkness in him, said John. Darkness, of course, being all that is not holy or more, all that is *unholy*. In the beginning of John's gospel, we're told of the Word of God, i.e., the Son of God, Jesus, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (Jn 1:4).

In John 8, Jesus stood up in the temple in Jerusalem and said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

So, having read that God is light and the Son is that life which is the light of men, what does it mean for Jesus to tell us that *we* are the light of the world? It has to be enormous, doesn't it? What it must mean is that what is most essential to God's own being, his holiness, he gives to us. Peter says that we are 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet 1:4).

Please note that I'm not just quoting one author as if he had a little bent that the others didn't share. Almost all the NT writers contribute to this thought.

In him, in Christ, we are made light. Certainly not made light of, but made light itself.

If we can equate God's holiness with his righteousness, which I think we *mostly* can – 'mostly' because God's holiness is more than just his righteousness, but his righteousness, his moral perfections, are part of his holiness. If we can make that connection, then what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 helps to open this up for us.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In language that John might use, what that means is that the One who is light, in whom were all the perfections of God and in 'whom there is no variation or shadow due to change' (Jas 1:17), that One was made to be darkness. On the cross he drew all darkness to himself and consumed it in his own being. Returning to the start of John's gospel:

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.
(Jn 1:5)

Rather, the *light* has overcome the darkness.

We could rewrite what Paul wrote (in 2 Cor 5:21):

For our sake God made his Son who was light to be darkness, so that in him we might become the light of God.

Because God is light, he will have no darkness in his kingdom. Paul, this time in Colossians 1, urges us to give:

...thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:12-14)

That's something you could never do for yourself but God has done it for you. In redemption, through the forgiveness of sins, he has lifted you out of the dominion darkness and placed you in the kingdom of his Son, the kingdom of light. And so that you could dwell in the kingdom of light he has first made you light. What about that?

To build on Jesus' words that *we* are the light of the world, just as *he* is the light of the world, we're told in Ephesians 5:

...at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.
(Eph 5:8a)

In effect, in Christ, God has entered our darkness, he has become our darkness and defeated it, so that in him we are granted not just to *have* but to *be* the very light of God. Having taken our darkness into himself and destroyed it, he gives us his Holy Spirit to shine his light in our whole beings in such a way that we become that light ourselves.

The business of salvation is no small thing, is it? Now if that's so, and as it *is* so, we may think about our general theme, that our church is 'A Church For Others'. We are that, we are a Church for others, but only in a secondary sense. We are first and foremost and must only ever try to be a Church for God. Only then will we be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As we live for him, as we live as his lights in the world and so shine his light *into* the world, those whose hearts he opens to respond to the light will be drawn to it. That will bring opposition.

If we try to be what we think the world will be attracted to, or worse, if we actually become anything that attracts the world, we will not be walking in the light but in the darkness. We could be all sorts of things to attract others into our meetings but it's only as we are true to the light that we will draw others into the light. It's only as we are true to the light that what we do will have positive, eternal consequences, both for us and for others.

As Paul urges us in Ephesians,

Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true) (Eph 5:8b-9)

Or, as Jesus encouraged us in our Gospel this morning:

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Mt 5:16)