

## Sermon 05/02/17 – Salt and Light

Prayer: Lord, align our hearts to your purpose this morning, give us passion and courage, and help us be salt and light to the world around, so we reveal your glory. Amen

Salt and light – two things we have every day, two things we probably enjoy, and a bible passage we are probably very familiar with – a message about bringing out flavour, about being sunshine in the world – warm and comfortable! In fact, help me here! Please could you all close your eyes and keep them closed – relax – picture yourself sitting in warm sunshine, perhaps by the seaside – in your hands a fresh pack of delicious chips, hot from the fish and chip stall, sprinkled lightly with salt! Take one, savour the flavour, feel the warmth of the sunlight.

And, before you open your eyes, I have one request – when I ask you do so, please look straight at me.

OK – open your eyes (Flash torch). Ouch – that wasn't very nice – Oh, and perhaps you have a cut on a finger – the salt from the chips stings as it enters the wound!

It's easy to think of salt and light as comfortable and friendly – but salt stings as it cleanses wounds, light blinds in the darkness, it hurts, it makes us blink – it shines into dark corners and shows up the cobwebs and dirt (look up there for example).

Perhaps we need to think again about exactly what Jesus was saying as he called us to be salt and light in the world!

Let's start by looking at the broad scene. Jesus has been busy performing miracles throughout Galilee – news has spread about him and people are coming for many miles to hear him and see the healings etc. Thousands follow him onto the low hills, and in a natural amphitheatre he starts to teach them – “Blessed are those...” he says as he teaches them the first eight beatitudes – why not take some time today just to dwell on each little phrase – Blessed are those who are poor in spirit., Blessed are those who mourn..” . Notice it's in the third person – blessed are those... , it's a message to all those who have come to watch him, to observe, to see what he's about.

But then Jesus voice changes – he turn to his disciples, to us, to each of us that has already made that commitment to follow him – “Blessed are you”, he says, “when people insult and persecute you...”. Why would people do that you wonder – and then comes Jesus’ answer: “You are the salt of the world... You are the light of the world...”. Jesus message about being salt and light isn’t a nice comfortable call sit in our safe church, and offer flavour and a warm glow to the world. It’s to go out into the world around us, and be salt in a wound, to shine light in dark corners, and to consider ourselves blessed when people respond by insulting and rejecting us!

Our readings today can take us another step too. The passage from Isaiah is another section where the prophet is showing the rebellious people of God how they are failing to honour God, and live by his principles – they go through their rituals, but fail to grasp God’s radical character – his boundless love, his burning justice, his totally unreasonable mercy!

Listen to what God says he wants of us: “break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I’m interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.”

The message is exactly the one Jesus gives us – get involved in the problems of the world, be salt, and the light you bring will be the glory of the Lord. And the context is the same too. Isaiah is raging against the “religiosity” of his time – people making a show of their religion, following the letter of the law, and ignoring the character of God embodied in the spirit of the law. And what does Jesus follow the salt and light with? “I have not come to abolish the law, I have come to fulfil – to complete – the law”. Jesus mission is not to say “Oh don’t worry about that old stuff, here’s something to replace it! He says, look I have come to help you understand and fully embody the spirit of God which lies behind it!” He goes on in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount to amplify what that means with practical examples of how the letter of the law is not enough – not just “do not murder”, but don’t harbour murderous thoughts; not just “do not commit adultery”, but do not harbour lustful thoughts; if a soldier commands you to go one mile, go with him two miles!

The essence of all these is the same – fully embrace the character of God embodied in the law, and you will bring honour to God – get out there, be salt, and shine light! This is what God wants of us, knowing it may well bring us insult and persecution.

Perhaps I should add a word here on the idea that we are “blessed” (or as some translations have it “happy”) when such things happen to us. Personally I don’t feel “happy” when people slander and insult me, let alone persecute me – so what is Jesus saying? I think he is saying, if you are clear about your purpose in being salt and light, if you understand that you are truly acting out of God’s character, and bringing Him the glory, then you will recognise these insults etc as clear signs that you are being effective salt and light – and that makes you blessed or contented!

[I want to be liked – I want people to say nice things about me – I’d like you to say something warm and encouraging to me afterwards about this sermon! And of course, here in this place, I believe I am standing amongst fellow disciples of the Lord. But out there in the world, I can celebrate when what I have spoken or done brings insult or ridicule – providing I’m acting in God’s will it’s a living sign that I am being “salty”!]

I want to give three examples to try and illustrate something of what I mean. One of the core callings on my life, and that of my wonderful wife Liz, has been to try and show the world something of what God intends marriage to be and to mean. As I’m speaking this morning at the start of Marriage Week it seems like a good time to just share a little of what that has meant to us. We’ve been actively involved in this area for 32 years, ever since our lives, and my faith, were transformed on a Marriage Encounter weekend. That weekend opened my eyes to the fullness of marriage as God intended it to be, and made my purpose in life clear – it was to be “salt” in the world in this specific area.

That’s why for the past 30 years we have done the marriage preparation here in St Michael’s, helping this church show the couples that come along a little of God’s vision for marriage. It’s why three or four times a year we are away leading weekends for Marriage Encounter. It takes Liz into the schools around here with Explore, taking in couples to share their experience with curious, but also often sceptical, young people. It’s what gets me up every Monday to send out a weekly newsletter about all that’s happening around marriage to leaders in all sorts of organisations, and what draws me into meetings with politicians, civil servants, charity leaders

and others, trying to bring God's "un-common sense" to their conversations and plans. It's why in this coming Marriage Week we'll be once again both highlighting the damage that turning away from marriage as a society is doing to this generation and generations to come, as well as encouraging couples everywhere to cherish their relationship by having some fun together on a date. It's why I calmly walked away from a very well paid job 11 years ago and accepted God's call to do this full time ignoring the "you're mad", and "you'll soon be broke", remarks of my colleagues; it's why my heart rejoiced as a major national charity threatened us with libel action as we called them to account for not standing for marriage as their founder, a Catholic priest, had set down in their purpose and objects.

I share this, not to draw attention to myself, but rather to illustrate what being "salt" has meant. It's about discovering God's calling on your life, and then putting heart and soul, time and money, into the project – all the time letting God's light shine in dark places. It certainly hasn't made me rich or famous, and indeed I know that there are some out there who automatically contradict what we are saying, defying even the facts, statistics, psychology, and brain neuro-physics that stand as testament to the good of marriage – our message sticks in their throat, our salt makes their wounds sore, our light hurts their eyes as it shines. I frequently leave meetings with my heart weeping feeling alone and discouraged – until I turn my gaze back to Jesus standing on the mountainside: "Blessed are you when...."

The Church of England gets it in the neck too for being "salty"! Just last week the bishops published a report on where the process of the conversations in the church concerning homosexuality and marriage have got to. In it they explained that there was no strong consensus to change the definition of marriage from the current one of "one man and one woman" to include couples of the same sex – they drew a distinction between "civil marriage" and "holy matrimony". They also accepted that there are many instances where our love and acceptance of those with same sex attractions have fallen short of God's standards. In so doing they have of course drawn howls of derision, insults of systematic homophobia, bigotry and worse, both from those inside and outside the church. How are we ever going to be regarded as relevant and welcoming if we don't move with the times seems to be the cry – how will we grow if we don't align ourselves with where people are?

This sermon is not the place for me to try and discuss the rights, or wrongs, of the latest report on the issue, but what I do rejoice in that the Bishops are earnestly seeking God's heart, to put

into practice the principles that underpin his law, as perfectly fulfilled in Jesus: both his holiness and his love; both his justice and his mercy. They are not seeking to be “relevant” or attractive to society, but rather to be salt that points to the truth, and to be light that shines into the dark corners of the world.

And what of our local church? Well it being the first Sunday of the month it falls to me to introduce our Charity of the month – the one we shall be praying for, and hopefully learning a bit more about. We are starting with the smallest charity we support – our own St Michael’s hardship fund. It’s money we as a church have set aside specifically to help parishioners who fall on hard times – perhaps through ill-health, loss of a job or whatever – and who suddenly face a financial demand they just can’t cope with. A few years ago the rector learned of an elderly couple whose cooker had blown up so they had no hot food, and no way to replace it either. Within the day a new cooker had been bought, transported to their home, and was fitted by a member of the church. It was a practical example of putting the resources of the church into use to help the poor and weak in our midst. Nothing spectacular or showy, simply an act of love and care that showed God’s heart and character in action – being salt and light.

So there are three things I think we need to take from this familiar passage today:

First, what is your purpose in life? How is your relationship with Jesus so woven into your life that it compels you to go and live out his love in action? I can’t answer that for you, but I can tell you what it’s not! It’s not to be a generally nice sort of person whose life is littered with odd minor acts of “being nice” or whose measure of success is being happy or popular! If in your heart these are things you feel motivated by, I’d ask you to come back to God’s word, and take a long hard look at the whole of the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matt 5-8). Read, reflect, pray – ask God to reveal what his calling to you is!

When you better understand your purpose you will be better equipped to go and be “salt and light”. In so doing you will make wounds uncomfortable but cleaner, eyes may be dazzled, but dark shadowy corners will start to reveal their dusty cobwebs. You will be a radical challenge to the world out there, which will more than likely react with insult and opposition, rather than popularity and applause.

And the third is that we have to be “out there in the world” to do this. Salt is no use in a salt cellar, light is no use under a bushel – if we sit in our comfy church, surrounded with nice

disciples, we are not much use! We have to get out there and engage with the world at large, even though it will reject us and despise us - anything less and we are ignoring the heart of the message which Jesus directed to those closest to Him.

Three things – clarity of purpose founded in the heart and nature of God; the courage and tenacity to be actively seeking to be salt and light measured more by the number of insults we receive than by popularity; and passionate engagement in the world, getting outside our cosy church to where the poor, oppressed and the needy are.

That's Jesus' call! How will you respond to this oh so familiar passage?