

Salt and light

If people today think much about salt, it's usually one of two things – we need some more salt to make our food tastier... or we need to reduce our salt intake to get our blood pressure down.

That might be simplifying things a bit, but it does ring true. We don't think much about salt... it's just there, isn't it? On the table, ready to be sprinkled on our food.

From a 21st century perspective, it's hard to grasp how important salt has been for the overwhelming majority of human history. Until the commercialisation of bulk ice during the 19th century and in introduction of refrigeration from the 1920s, salt was the main way that food – particularly meat - was preserved.

For hundreds of years the Royal Navy, the greatest navy in the world, ran on a diet of salt beef and salt pork...

Salt is important stuff – essential for human life, but also essential for human civilisation. Wars have been fought over salt. The salt tax in France was one of the causes of the Revolution and Ghandi led 100,000 protesters in making their own salt from seawater to oppose the British salt tax in India.

It remains important today: It might surprise you to learn that Australia is the 5th largest producer of salt in the world, at 14 million tonnes per annum, with global production approaching 250 million. Only a small portion of that is eaten, though – most is used in agriculture, water treatment, chemical production (particularly caustic soda and chlorine), de-icing, and other industrial use cases including manufacturing PVC and paper, producing aluminium and glazing pottery.

Back in Jesus' time, though, it was used primarily for preserving, but also for seasoning food.

In today's gospel reading, which is from the sermon on the mount, and directly follows the Beatitudes, Jesus tells those listening that they are the salt of the earth. He tells us that, too: we are the salt of the earth.

But what does he mean when he says that? To be 'salty' with others is not a good thing... but we're not to be salty, but to be salt.

Salt enhances the flavour of food. If there's not enough salt the food is bland.

We can think about our relationships with others – how are we enhancing those relationships, as salt would enhance a meal? How are we enhancing the world around us?

And salt is a preservative, too. What we preserving? Are we choosing the right things to preserve?

There's a story that Roman soldiers were paid in salt, and that's where we get the 'salary' from – and also the expression that someone is 'worth their salt'. While 'salary' does come from 'salt', the Romans had coins, and that's generally how they paid their soldiers, possibly supplemented with salt on occasion. Nevertheless, salt was valuable. And if Jesus is saying that we are the salt of the earth, he's saying that we are valuable too.

Do we think we're valuable? Are we living in ways that are worth our salt? What does that look like in our lives – or in our church life together – today? Do we hold each other to be valuable?

The right mixture of salt and water can clean wounds, prevent infection, and promote healing. How can we bring about healing in ourselves, each other, and the world around us?

But not only does Jesus say, “you the salt of the earth,” he also says “you are the light of the world.”

Just like we take salt for granted in our lives today, so we generally take light. Light is everywhere at the flick of a switch or the touch of a button. We don’t generally find ourselves in the dark unexpectedly.

Again, at the time Jesus was preaching, the situation was very different. When the sun went down, it was dark. Light would be provided by fires, maybe by torches, and often by lamps, with a wick in oil or tallow. What light people had after dark was limited and, like salt, it was valuable.

And Jesus says, “you are the light of the world”.

What’s more, John’s gospel tells us that Jesus also said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

The light that a lamp provides isn’t for the lamp itself, but for the room – or the world – around it.

Both these images – of the people being the light, and Jesus being the light – can be found in Isaiah, firstly from chapter 9:2, where we hear “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”, and then in chapter 42:6, where God says “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”.

Jesus is the light... and we share that light.

How are we going with that? Are we sharing that light? In what ways are we shining the light of love, peace, mercy, forgiveness, hope, healing, compassion for people who are in dark places?

When have you sought the light of truth? And when have you found yourself hiding from it? What parts of ourselves are living in the light? And what parts are hiding in the shadows? Who has been a light in your life? And for whom are you a light today?

Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and while he doesn’t explain exactly what he means or how it works, he gives us a warning or a caution about what we do in response.

“If the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (5:13b)

My year 7 science knowledge tells me that salt is sodium chloride (NaCl), you can’t make it ‘not salty’ – so salt, at a chemical level, can’t lose its saltiness. But at a practical level – you can lose saltiness: if it’s too humid, and the hole on the salt shaker becomes clogged, well, you’re not going to be getting any seasoning on your dinner... or, if you’re a first century Judean salt merchant, you might decide that you can dilute your salt which is uncommon and expensive, with some sand which is common and cheap – if not free. This ‘salt’ will have lost its saltiness, and if people use it to preserve meat, they’re going to be terribly disappointed.

And Jesus said, “A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.” (5:14b-15a)

If a town is on a hill, with cooking fires burning, and a few torches and maps, it's going to be visible in the dark. A fire will only illuminate a small space, but the fire itself will be visible for miles! And if you're fortunate enough to have a lamp, you use its light – you don't cover it.

We should, as followers of Jesus, be visible. We should not hide our light from the world.

Jesus continued, "Instead they put [the lamp] on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

We need to let our light shine, in our church, in our community and in our world. We might think that we don't have the talent, or the ability, or the time to be able to share our light, but Jesus doesn't say "some of you are the light of the world", he says "you [all] are the light of the world. Every light matters, and even the smallest, dimmest light makes a difference to those in darkness.

And we know that there is so much darkness in the world today. Just as there has always been.

As our reading continues, Jesus seems to change the topic: ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

He claims that his teaching (5:17) is a continuation of the scriptures. He didn't come to overrule them, but rather to interpret and fulfil them.

The written scriptures (which for Jesus' teaching would have been what we know as the Old Testament) are important and they are enduring – Jesus said "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

People sometimes say something like, "We're Christians, we don't need to worry about the Old Testament, because we've got the New Testament now".

Interestingly, Jesus said "... anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven," Usually, as we read passages like this, we find things are black or white – you're either saved or not saved, or alive in Christ or dead in sin, or you're with the sheep or with the goats... but here, if you set aside one of these commands, you're not 'out' you're just 'least'.

I think we can take it from that that if we don't get the details right – but still have our eyes on Jesus, we're okay. But if we do work to get the details right, then we're better off for it: "whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus assures us.

In Jesus' time, it was keeping the law that was held to be important. And it seems that the letter of the law was more important than the spirit. The religious leaders of the time were known for their dedication to the law – keeping it and ensuring that others kept it too.

But Jesus said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

It's a point that Jesus makes throughout his ministry... those that were the custodians of the law, often failed to keep it.

Jesus said in Matthew chapter 23, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.” (Matthew 23:2-3) and

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites” (Matthew 23:23,25,27 and 29)

Those in authority, had gone astray. Even worse, they were leading others astray or setting them impossible task. They were, it seems, consumed with their own authority and importance – they held themselves better than everyone else. Think of the Pharisee who prayed “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” (Luke 18:11-12)

That remains a caution for all of us, but especially for those who lead today. As Jesus shared later in the Sermon on the mount, ““Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)

We heard it in our Old Testament reading this morning... “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers” (Isaiah 58:3b), when what God wants of his people is to “loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free... share your food with the hungry.... provide the poor wanderer with shelter ...[clothe the naked] and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Shirley shared with us last week in our Old Testament reading from Micah, which is a favourite for church signs: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) Those three things describe how we should live: justly, mercifully and humbly.

In today’s gospel reading, gives us three things too.

Be salt: preserve what is good, enhance the lives of those around us.

Be light: Share the light of Jesus, Jesus who lived and died and rose again for us, with the world.

Be righteous: Be good people. Live the way that God wants us to live – justly, mercifully and humbly.

As followers of Jesus, and as the body of Christ, let us do that.

Be salt. Be light. Be righteous.

Amen