

'Salt of the earth, light of the world'

Sermon message at Evensong St James by the Rev Derek Lightbourne February 2014

Keynote Bible Reading: Matthew 5.13 – 20

One of the most awesome photos in the 20th century was taken some 41 years ago now by a satellite way out in the blackness of space looking back at a small round blue and white object which is Planet Earth. It suggests something unique, and despite the search for 'exo-planets' to date there has been no discovery of anything out there like life as we know it.

I am constantly in awe of life. Thus the imagery of Jesus recorded in this evening's reading from Matthew's gospel for me is really profound, referring to 'salt of the earth, light of the world'. May I suggest it has a 'cosmic' focus. Jesus could have said, you are salt, and you are light. Rather though we are to be 'salt *of the earth*', and 'light *of the world*.' The word world translating the Greek is *cosmos*, so there is a wider connotation. Jesus refers to two aspects of life necessary for human existence. For life to be there needs to be light, and for humans to be healthy we need to have some salt in our diet. Many living creatures need salt in their diet.

This evening then as we give thought to a 'cosmic' perspective, you are invited to spend some moments reflecting on each in a much wider dimension than the salt we add in cooking or sprinkle on food. More too than what people consume in fast foods.

Thus there will be 7 slides on screen (taken in the Andes of South America) depicting the theme of salt. The salt collects by the leaching what is in the soil and with nowhere to go gathers in very large '*salar*' or lakes. Salt in rocks has also been mined. Please keep these pictures in mind as we then go on to see its application of us being 'salt *of the earth*'.

[*Slideshow*]

It is known that in the ancient world salt was highly valued. In Jesus' time it was associated with 3 aspects. First a sign of *purity*. That was portrayed in the slides of the glistening white of the *salar* and being mined. In Roman times it was said that it was the purest of all elements because for them it came from the sun and the sea. When Jesus calls his followers to be salt it is with the intent of their living lives of purity, in speech, in conduct, and thought. Jesus would also be mindful of the teaching in Leviticus to add salt to the sacrifice symbolised sincerity of grace. One further aspect was that it was a symbol of friendship with God and such was sealed in a covenant where salt was sprinkled on the offering implying purity. Thus these are likely to be implicit in Jesus' use of this imagery.

Two other aspects would have been mindful. Salt was a *preservative*, keeping food from going rotten or decaying. I'm mindful these days where some tribal people still preserve their fish and animal products in salt. Thus there's the sense that the Christian is to keep free from corruption. A third aspect is of lending flavour to food items. We well know that from fast foods – and likely way too much salt. When in moderation nevertheless it does add flavour. Symbolically that can have meaning in lending flavour to society. This is likely the intent of Paul in the letter to the Colossians – 'Let your speech also be gracious, seasoned with salt, ...'

This in contrast to what seems to be the way of the media, of bringing out that which is worst in society. Constantly there is focus on crime and violence. Sure it is important to note that such do exist. But I would much prefer a balance of

'good news' stories, and these seem to be sadly lacking in media exposure. This would include examples in our caring, in concern for 'the last, the lost and the least', as we are reminded. What *good* things are people doing? Yet they seem to be not rated newsworthy. Yes there are exceptions like the 'good sorts' added to the news of Sundays on TV1. I would also like to think at the country's leadership level Christian influence brings a concern for the well-being of peoples, and decisions made on that account. Yet so often it is portrayed as being way out of touch, as in the discussions about 'Living Wage.

Salt then – be 'salt of the earth'. A natural mineral product in its origin, and regarded as a symbol for purity and flavour, and to be an example in enriching society.

Light – 'to be light of the world'. How critical this is for life. If there were no sun to give light there would be no life. There would be no existence as we know it. Let's take a moment then to meditate on some pictures of that which gives life. Sunrises and sunsets are often so beautiful – God's artistry and human-taken photos scarcely convey the ambience.

[Let's bring them to mind in a few slides]

In thinking about light being critical for life, it is so taken for granted. That is, until there's a power cut from storm or earthquake and one dashes for candles or a torch! When Jesus used this symbol he expanded it with the example of 'a city on the hill' – presumably referring to Jerusalem. The suggestion then is about visibility – being seen. This was very real for me recently in walking the Rimutaka Incline on the east side and encountering three tunnels. As one went in it took awhile for the eyes to adjust from the bright sunlight. The torch was hardly of use. Then when in the tunnel I realized there was a good purpose – my presence to be seen by the mountain bikers negotiating the rough surface, and with their dim lights not especially helpful seeing what or who was ahead.

William Barclay in his commentary suggests that being as light in the world is the greatest compliment paid to the individual Christian. He recalls Jesus' words, 'As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.' In Jesus' day, light in darkness was a much more precious item than what we take for granted today. I'm reminded of being in the Catacombs of Rome and seeing the numbers of little lamp-stands containing oil used for negotiating the underground passages. Then as if the believers don't get the message Jesus follows it up with 'Let your light so shine before others so that they may see your good works, and glory your Father in heaven.' Yet whilst a familiar motif, it is likely more difficult to apply than being like salt of the earth.

Perhaps we might note from the verse people are not seeing *us* necessarily, rather 'our good deeds.' There's a person in Tawa I frequently see walking round the streets with a big council provided plastic bag picking up litter – paper, plastic, aluminium, and rubbish. I don't know his name, and nor whether he is a Christian, but I can certainly see the outcome of his 'good deed.' Probably most of us as we do 'good deeds' would prefer they are done unobtrusively. Yet Jesus also says as we witness another's good deed we need to give glory to God. How about that? Perhaps the reason is that it is cumulative as an offering for God – that people do want to take care of this world, this part of the cosmos divinely created. Yes I do

have done what I might describe as good deeds in care of creation. I'm not sure that others might have given glory to God, yet the action in itself is surely worthy.

Indeed it was a dilemma when on Campbell Island south of New Zealand, and there was fishermen's litter on the rocky beaches – plastic, rope bits, broken glass and aluminium, and we were instructed to leave things as they are in that environment. Thankfully on the positive side much effort has removed predators which have devastated the natural vegetation and birdlife. Now there are no rats and mice, rabbits or feral sheep so as to be able to preserve the pristine environment.

In concluding may I place this in context of our parish focus on mission and discipleship. What might have been in Jesus' mind as he said about being '*salt of the earth, light of the world*'? That would suggest a concern that our being there, being God's presence in the world is a key aspect of discipleship. Our actions *do* count. A profound comment was made in Theodore Robinson's commentary on the passage and I leave you with this: 'In this world the honour, almost the reputation, of God is in the hands of his children.'