

Matthew 5: 1 – 20

‘Saltiness’

Introduction ...

Thankfully for AshFest it’s been a reasonable weekend weather-wise. In the last month – we had massive variations. Do you remember when it was so hot in July?

There’s a saying that in the heat “*Horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow*”!! But I suspect that we were all in the ‘horse category’ at times. You may have drunk a great deal of water .... Did you know that if you had put a pinch of salt in that water – you may well not have tasted it because your body needed that salt? Salt is absolutely essential for physical life.

In our Gospel reading for this week, Jesus says: “**You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.**”

Living, as most of us do, in cultures of plenty, we can take household goods like salt for granted. But as Mark Kurlansky writes in his book, *Salt: A World History: “from the beginning of civilisation until about one hundred years ago, salt was one of the most sought after commodities in human history.”* The ancients believed that salt would ward off evil spirits. Religious covenants were often sealed with salt. Salt was used for medicinal purposes, to disinfect wounds, check bleeding, stimulate thirst, and treat skin diseases. Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt – hence our English word ‘*salary*’. Brides and grooms rubbed salt on their bodies to enhance fertility. The Romans salted their vegetables, as we do our modern day ‘salads’. Around ten thousand years ago, dogs were first domesticated using salt; people would leave salt outside their homes to entice the animals. And of course, in the centuries before refrigeration, salt was essential for food preservation.

Nowadays, we still use salt for all sorts of purposes. Salt accentuates flavours, melts ice, softens water, and hastens a boil. It soothes sore throats, eases swelling, and cleanses wounds. In some contexts, salt has more than a flavour; it has an edge. It stings, burns, abrades, and irritates. If we don’t have enough salt in our bodies, we die. But if we have too much? we also die!

Now, of course, it is possible to take a metaphor too far. No single descriptor from Scripture – salt, light, bride, clay, sheep, branch, dove, soil – will capture or contain the entirety of what it means to live as followers of Christ. But when Jesus calls his listeners “**the salt of the earth**” he is saying something profound, something we can easily miss in our 21<sup>st</sup> century context unless we pay attention in depth.

This is taken from one Bible commentator: **Debie Thomas: First of all, Jesus is telling us who we are. We are salt. We are not “supposed to be” salt, or “encouraged to become” salt, or promised that “if we become” salt, God will love us more. The language Jesus uses is 100% descriptive; it’s a statement of our identity. We are the salt of the earth. We are that which will enhance or embitter, soothe or irritate, melt or sting, preserve or ruin. Rather like the Marriage vows: For better or for worse, we are the salt of the earth, and what we do with our saltiness matters. It matters a lot Whether we want to or not, whether we notice or not, whether we’re intentional about it or not, we spiritually impact the world we live in.**

**Secondly, we are precious. Again, it’s easy to miss the import of this in our modern world where salt is cheap and plentiful, but imagine what Jesus’ first followers would have heard when he called them salt. Remember** PTO

who they were. Remember what sorts of people Jesus addressed in his famous Sermon on the Mount. The poor, the mournful, the meek, the persecuted. The hungry, the sick, the crippled, the frightened. The outcast, the misfit, the disreputable: “*you*” he told them all. “*you* are the salt of the earth.”

You are treasured. And I am commissioning *you*. For all of us who may have spent months or years trying to earn divine favour, believing that our piety might someday make us precious in God’s eyes, I hope this metaphor will stop us in our tracks. Jesus knowingly named a commodity that was priceless in his time and place. He conferred great value on those who did not consider themselves valuable. He is still doing this. For us. Now.

Thirdly, salt does its best work when it’s poured out. When it’s scattered. When it dissolves into what is around it. Salt isn’t meant to cluster. It’s meant to give of itself. It’s meant to share its unique flavour in order to bring out the best in all that surrounds it. Which means that if we want to enliven, enhance, deepen, and preserve the world we live in, we must not hide within the walls of our churches. We must not cluster and congregate simply for our own comfort.

Salt doesn’t exist to preserve itself; it exists to preserve what is *not* itself. Another metaphor for this? A metaphor Jesus used all the time? *dying* Jesus calls us to die to self. To die in order to live. Remember – we *are* salt. It’s not a question of striving to become what we are not. It’s a question of living into the precious fullness of what we already are.

Lastly, salt is meant to enhance, not dominate. Christian saltiness heals; it doesn’t wound. It purifies; it doesn’t dessicate. It softens; it doesn’t destroy. Even when Christian saltiness has an edge, even when, for example, it incites thirst, it only *draws* the thirsty towards the Living Water of God. It *doesn’t* leave the already thirsty parched, dehydrated, and embittered.

One of the great tragedies – and most consequential sins – of historic Christianity has been its failure to understand this distinction. Salt *fails* when it dominates. Instead of eliciting goodness, it destroys the rich potential all around it. This, unfortunately, can be the reputation Christianity has. Sometimes individual Christians or the church as an Institution can be known for shaming, not blessing, for using words to burn, not heal.

This is not what Jesus ever intended when he called us the salt of the earth. Our preciousness was never meant to make us proud and self-righteous; it was meant to humble and awe us.

So what do we do? Our vocation in these times and places is not to lose our saltiness. That’s the temptation – to retreat. To hide. To choose blandness instead of boldness. To keep our love for Jesus a hushed and embarrassed secret. But that kind of salt, Jesus told his listeners, is useless. It is untrue to its very essence.

And so we are called to live wisely, creatively, and in balance. Salt at its best sustains and enriches life. It pours itself out with discretion so that God’s kingdom might be known on the earth – a kingdom of spice and zest, a kingdom of health and wholeness, a kingdom of varied depth, flavour and complexity.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes concrete the work of love, compassion, healing, and justice. It’s not enough to simply believe. It’s not enough to bask in our blessedness while all around us God’s creation burns. To be blessed, to be salt, to be followers of Jesus, is to take seriously what our identity signifies.

We are the salt of the earth. That is what *we are*, for better or for worse. May it be for better. May your pouring out – and mine – be for the life of the world.

**Material adapted from: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2515-salty> Debie Thomas: [debie.thomas1@gmail.com](mailto:debie.thomas1@gmail.com)**