

**'Covenant of salt'?**  
*Psalm 111:1-4, 7-10, Matthew 5:13-20*

5 February 2017

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

"Here is another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now, that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house: be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven".

This is how *The Message*, a contemporary rendering of the Bible puts our Gospel reading for today. Sometimes, the use of modern language is able to bring fresh meaning to well-known passages from Scripture and I think this is the case here. The verses we've read from Matthew's Gospel are part of the Sermon on the Mount, and they are among the best known words of Jesus. "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world" says Jesus to his disciples in the traditional translation, leaving it to them, and by extension to us what qualities of salt and light we are to embody. The usual way of explaining it is to highlight the great importance of salt in 1<sup>st</sup> century Middle Eastern cultures. The Talmud, the central Scripture of Rabbinic Judaism puts it this way: "*The world can get along without pepper but it cannot get along without salt*".

Clearly salt was prized as flavouring, when added to food and before the invention of refrigerators salt was the only means of preserving food in a hot climate. It was also valued for its cleansing, healing properties and Jesus may have had any or all of those meanings in mind. What the *Message Bible* highlights is that salt is not there to dominate the taste of the food rather its presence brings out other flavours in the food too. And because this saying is part of what discipleship is all about, our 'saltiness' is there to bring out the God-flavours of this earth, to help people taste godliness. And although this is a really tall order, yet isn't it a marvellous vocation?

To help people taste godliness! How are we going to do it this coming week?

But there are some other things that can be said about salt. As we said most Christian commentators talk about salt as preservative and draw some well argued spiritual meaning out of it. Something like the job of disciples is to preserve the purity and freshness of Jesus' teachings, or the doctrines of the Church (which may not always be exactly the same!) But as I re-read this passage in the context of our current human situation the idea struck me that being salt of the Earth – this time spelt with a capital 'E' – might also mean to care about and act for the preservation of our planet. And it brought to mind things like global warming, nuclear proliferation, environmental awareness, pollution, exploitation of natural resources and other living creatures, and so on. How can we act as 'salt' in this understanding?

The other trail of thought led me to the Old Testament usage of the idea of 'salt' and 'saltiness' and I discovered an intriguing idea, the 'covenant of salt'. So what was this about? And has it any relevance to our understanding of Jesus' metaphor? Well, the phrase appears three times in the Hebrew Bible (our OT) and to get something of its meaning we have to take on board a scholar's note. According to this, because of the enduring quality of salt, it was often used in Ancient Middle Eastern ceremonies to seal an agreement. Keeping this in mind and looking at those three passages (Numbers 18:19, Leviticus 2:13, 2 Chronicles 13:5) we find that two of them talk of adding salt to the offerings for God: 'Salt must accompany all offerings' we read in Leviticus, and the third one talks of the enduring nature of God's covenant with King David and his descendants.

So, it seems that a 'covenant of salt' was about a relationship of trust with God, which was taken as a long-term, enduring one. Because of the sacrificial reference, the question arises: could this mean that our offering to God, - which we now understand as our act of worship offered to God, - should be a 'tasty', rather than a bland offering? That our relationship with God should be flavoursome, enjoyable rather than duty-bound? Plenty of scope here for working out how to add more 'salt' to our worship and to our relationship with God in general. The Psalmist knew a thing or two about 'salty' worship. Time and again we come across the call for singing new songs to the Lord, to employ everything at our disposal to produce the best, most colourful, beauty-filled worship we are capable of.

And why this is crucial is, because the relationship built and nurtured this way will enable us to be real salt and light in the world.

In many ways the two metaphors replicate each other in the ancient Hebrew way of parallelism, but the second parallel usually adds something to the first. When we think about the meaning of light we find a great richness in its Biblical use. Let me just pick out two. Light is capable of transforming our vision. People who have visited Budapest, capital of my homeland of Hungary, often ask me if the river Danube – which flows through Budapest - is ever really blue, as in the title of the famous Waltz composed by Johann Strauss. Because when they saw it, it was rather murky and not at all blue. The answer, of course, is that it depends on when you look at it. When the sun shines, and there is a cloudless blue sky, the Danube is truly blue. But when there is no sun, only a darkish, cloudy sky above, the river is murky. It all depends on the light!

We have already hinted at the second characteristic of light: it has to be connected to the source of energy, in a way, it is a reflected light. Richard Rohr in his book *The Divine Dance* talks about our light as the reflection of God's image in us and he develops the idea of us being a two way reflecting mirror. We look at Jesus and the more we look at him, hopefully, we begin to look more like him. And people looking at us will begin to see something of the reflection of Jesus, who is the image of God *par excellence*.

Of course, if we are doing our job properly, we have to be prepared for the world not necessarily noticing *us* in the process. If you think about it the salt melts into the overall taste of the food unnoticeably simply by virtue of being salt. And the light cannot but shine as long as it is connected to the source of energy and not covered up. That's how they are. I never heard anyone saying when they step into a well-lit beautifully decorated room: 'What lovely light bulbs you have!' or having a delicious meal, exclaiming: 'I really enjoyed this sea-salt you gave us with the roast duck!' Maybe this was part of the reason why Jesus chose these two particular pictures. And why these sayings are not commandments, or predictions of the future, or some conditional promises. It's not 'you should be salt of the earth' or 'carry on the good work and eventually you'll become salt of the earth', or 'if you comply with this or that commandment you may be the salt of the earth and the light of the world'. It is a statement of fact: 'you are...'. And a statement of great trust on Jesus' part towards his disciples, just as if he said to them:

'You have already got all the necessary qualifications for being salt and light, just be what you are and don't stop!'

There is great encouragement here for us current day disciples too. In our individual uniqueness we all have the necessary qualifications to be salt and light or two-way reflecting mirrors, if you like. This church community of ours has all the necessary qualifications, which are not age-related, which don't have educational standards or social requirements to meet. They are there; they are precious and God-given. Trust God, who made you, and trust yourself as someone who is even now being shaped by God *with* great love and care and being equipped *for* great love and care!

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