*As Salt and Light*  Sermon Epiphany 5C

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

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Back as a student at Trinity College I had some education on preaching, one thing we were taught was pick a metaphor and stick to it. If a preacher uses too many images, too many examples then chances are the congregation become confused and switch off. And yet today Jesus mixes his metaphors; he talks about, compares his followers to, compares us to both salt and light.

Light that should shine forth from a hilltop, otherwise it has no point and salt, which savours and transforms - until it loses its saltiness then it needs to be thrown out. We will look at both images, salt at some length but first, briefly, light.

A few years ago I visited family in Wales and went down an old coal mine which is now owned by the National Museum of Wales. At one point all the lights we had with us were turned off and we were in deepest blackness. A minute later one solitary light came on and you could feel the relief amongst us.

Back in 1962 the astronaut John Glenn became the first American to go in orbit around the Earth. His trajectory took him over Western Australia at night and knowing this the city council of Perth urged its people to leave every light on. Glenn later wrote about being encouraged by the lights of Perth shining between the emptiness of the desert and the vastness of the Indian Ocean.

On a smaller scale in Dublin, if you go to Phoenix Park, which I believe is the largest park in Europe, you will find a handsome eighteenth century mansion once the residence of the British viceroy and now the official residence of the President of Ireland. In the window of the main reception room a lamp is left on every night as a welcome and encouragement for Irish emigrants to return home.

What use would any of those lights be if they were hid, their very point was to be seen. To reassure, to welcome, to encourage and to beckon.

Now think of salt, and seasoning, first of all a little can go a long way.

I remember one lunch in my monastic days, now monks don’t talk at meals. Breakfast was in silence and at lunch and dinner a book was read out. People need to communicate sometimes and a sign language has developed. Bread, milk, cheese, butter , water …. Each has a sign. A hand held thumb up at an angle meant ‘please pass the water.” One day goulash was served for lunch, a Hungarian stew seasoned with paprika. Very soon it was clear something was wrong, there was a frantic signalling for water. What should have been a pinch was clearly a packet.

Too much salt ruins food but just enough lifts it and fives it flavour, salt has many many uses and was a valuable commodity.

It was used as a currency, everybody needs it and governments have often had a monopoly on its sale and production. One of the protests Gandhi led his followers in was a march to the sea where they produced salt; leading to a violent reaction from the British. In India the production and sale of salt was a way of funding the colonial administration.

So what might being salt be like? How might we be seasoning that makes the world more flavoursome, better?

Time and again we Christians have led campaigns for social reform and a more equitable society.

Think of the Quaker Elizabeth Fry, who campaigned for prison reform.

William Wilberforce, whose activism ended slavery in the British Empire.

And more recently Martin Luther King and the Desmond Tutu, who were instrumental in bringing racial justice to their nations.

And who is there when things go wrong, who provides shelter, food, bedding and consolation to people fleeing floods or fire? The Churches first and foremost.

As a trustee of Methodist Mission Southern I am constantly impressed by their creative and compassionate work.

Now all this can seem quite beyond us. It can seem heroic and demands of us more than we have to give.

Who are we to campaign for change, to offer relief in the middle of a stormy night or to work with prisoners or adolescents with complex needs.

Well no, these tasks are not for us. But in the days left to us we can choose to include not exclude, we can chose to act out of hope over fear, we can seek to build bridges not walls.

Salt and light are only useful when they enhance something else. We, as followers of Jesus, fulfill our roles as disciples when we flavour the earth and illuminate the world with our actions and words that reveal the world God longs to see. Faith is not a personal virtue, a cosy corner to keep warm in, if that is how we live out faith then our light is dimmed and our flavour lost.

The seriousness with which Jesus commands us to be salt and light can be heard in the final four verses of our text today. Here Jesus says:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

With these words, Jesus corrects any misunderstanding about how his followers are to understand the law and the prophets: he has not come to do away with them; rather, he has come to fulfill them. Not only is the call to discipleship one that commands a salty luminescence, it is also one that commands obedience to the fulfillment of the law and the teachings of the prophets. Now, I don't think Jesus was necessarily an early champion of inerrancy with his words here. No, I believe what Jesus is saying with these words is that he has come to fulfill the whole of the law and the prophets, to fill them with meaning and not allow them to simply be bullet points by which we judge one another's righteousness. After all, that was what the scribes and Pharisees did.

With these words about salt, light, and the fulfillment of the law and prophets, Jesus is setting before us, his followers, some very deep truths about what it means to be his disciples. May we flavour the earth with the truth of the One who has fulfilled the law of God. May we light the way of the One of whom the prophets could only dream. May we commit to being salt and light so that our righteousness may exceed the righteousness of those who keep tabs. May we commit ourselves to the One who calls us to the joyous responsibility of sharing the love of God with others as salt and light.