

In the family talk we heard that as salt of the earth, we are called to add flavour and be a preserving influence in the world. When I first saw this was the passage for today I thought 'that's great – it's about getting out there and doing stuff for God, about being Christians in the world, not looking out from the church through the glass doors at the world out there, but *being* out there.' And I do want to explore what that means for us, because we do all go out from here to be in the world. But as I've lived with this passage over the last few weeks, God's taken me on a journey, and I believe this passage isn't just about looking outwards – but also about looking to Jesus (we could say looking upwards) and understanding how he was salt and light in the world, and also about looking inwards and seeing what God's salt and light are doing there. Because without looking at all those places we can become like the tasteless salt Jesus referred to.

But to start with looking outwards, when Jesus says 'you are the salt of the earth' and 'you are the light of the world' these are rich images for how we are to live as his disciples. There are many meanings that can be drawn from this and I'm only going to touch on a few. Something that salt and light have in common is that they are penetrating – they reach into all the corners of a cooked dish or a dark room. It only takes a little salt in a meal, or a small nightlight in a room, to change it completely. The whole dish tastes better and the whole room is less scary.

One commentator has noted that Jesus didn't use the analogy of honey, or something that sweetens, because that's not what we're doing as Christians. We're not trying to make everything sweet out there. Salt is an uncompromising flavour that is absolutely distinctive and unmistakable when it is there. In the Message version of the Bible, verse 14 is paraphrased as 'God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.' And the whole passage is about being distinctive as Christians, and different from other people.

In Colossians 4, v. 6 Paul wrote something about salt when instructing Christians how to live; he wrote 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone'. This is a reminder that what we say as Christians matters, because everything we say and do is an expression of our faith.

The loss of flavour that Jesus describes in Matthew 5: v. 13 seems strange to us because salt today is pure, but in those days the salt people had access to wasn't pure but was mixed with all kinds of other minerals and sand, and it was possible for the actual salt to leach out if it wasn't stored correctly, so that you were left only with the gravelly part, which has no taste. Apparently the rabbis of the day sometimes used salt as a symbol for wisdom, so saying to someone that they've lost their saltiness is like saying they have become foolish. A more modern way of saying this would be that they are no longer 'fit for purpose'. And none of us want to be like that. We have a God-given purpose in this life, and this calling to be salty is a call to live up to that purpose.

Again in the Message, being salt and light Christians is described as 'bringing out the God-flavours of this earth' and 'bringing out the God-colours in the world'. I like these descriptions because they emphasise that the Earth is already God's, He

made it and it belongs to Him, and our role is to make him seen in it through our lives. We're not doing things in our own strength; we are joining God where he is already at work. But we have to have the right flavour, God's flavour. We have to make our purposes the same as God's purposes, and focus on keeping on the right path and not getting side-tracked by distractions or temptations. So he gives us a well-lit path.

Light is a familiar theme in the Bible. In creation, God said 'Let there be light' (Genesis 1:3) and Jesus spoke of himself as 'the Light of the World'. In John 8:12 we read his words 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'. In the passage we are looking at today, Jesus says we are the light of the world, but our light originates with him.

When I was a science teacher in schools, the way we taught children the difference between a star and a planet was that a star gives out its own light and a planet is only seen because it reflects the light falling on it from a star. In one way we can say that Jesus is like a star, radiating God, and we are like planets, reflecting what we've received from Jesus. But actually I don't think that picture quite works, because we do have light within us, through the Holy Spirit. We are luminous with the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. Being salt and light Christians is not something we can be in our own strength, but only through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. We can see the fruits of the Spirit on that banner, and we can take those into every situation we meet, every day. However inadequate we may feel, and however often we slip up, Jesus will be revealed to others through his light in us.

The passage tells us that this light cannot be hidden, and Jesus says 'let it shine before men'. Our faith is irrepressible. Being salt and light Christians is not a burden or a chore – there is a cost, which I am sure we will see in future weeks, but the light and salt-flavour we have are impossible to quench when the Spirit is working within us.

But our purpose is to give praise to God - not to draw attention to ourselves. In Matthew 6:1 Jesus says: 'Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do you will have no reward from your Father in heaven'. So as salt and light Christians we are not called to be show-offs, but we *are* called to be penetrating, to make a difference in the world. The light we have from God is visible to others, and at the same time it guides us and keeps us close to him.

When Jesus spoke about us as the light of the world he compared this to a city on a hill. Looking at a city at night from far away there's a glow above it, which is made up of light from lots of little individual sources. Bible scholars have pointed out that in this picture of a city all lit up God is revealed by the effect of combining the lights of many individuals. The Beatitudes speak to us as individuals but they also say something to us as the Body of Christ, together. We shine together to reveal God to others, by being committed to each other and living as one body.

I said earlier that living as salt and light Christians is not just about looking outwards, but also about looking upwards to Jesus. How was Jesus salt and light in the world? He was distinctive and uncompromising, bringing God's flavour and the ultimate form

of preservation, *salvation*, to the world. Our lives are acts of worship for what Jesus has done for us.

As we sang earlier:

You deserve my every breath
For you've paid the great cost
Giving up your life to death
Even death on a cross.
You took all my shame away
There defeated my sin
Opened up the gates of heaven
And have beckoned me in.

If we look at how Jesus lived on Earth, we see that he was fully involved in the world, involved with all kinds of people, in all kinds of places – he did not stay closeted away and separate himself from the lives of other people. One commentator has described Jesus' life as living on the frontline – to the point of persecution. Maybe we should think about where our front lines are? Perhaps it's the place where God has put us now, in September 2013, our work, home, family, voluntary work, or perhaps it's further away.

One role of the Life Groups, starting this autumn, is to help us live on our own individual frontlines. The purpose of all the small groups at St Andrew's is to help us to be salt and light Christians, and everyone is invited to be in a group.

Something that's helped me understand the vision and values behind Life Groups is this description from Cell UK: We need to see that we can recapture the dynamic of the Early Church where building a relationship with God and becoming like Jesus, is our life's calling – kindling a passion for Jesus and a gratitude for what he has done (paraphrased from *Moving to Cells*, p. 12). These groups have Jesus at the centre; they are communities of honest relationships marked by sacrificial love; where everyone matures, everyone uses their gifts in ministry, and everyone makes God known (*Moving to Cells*, p. 13).

There are various daily Bible reading schemes around, and if you read Word for Today, you'll have seen that this verse about salt, Matthew 5:13, was the theme last Monday. I thought 'whoopie! My sermon's been written for me!' and one point of it was. The point made there was that salt and light Christians are called to be the best we can be in the places where God has put us, but more than that, called to bring out the best in the people we meet there. We can be instruments of change in those places, bringing positivity and hope. God's put us in the frontline, because it's the place where we can grow as disciples, and make a difference to others, over the next few months. And we can't do that if we stay in our salt cellar or hide our lights.

So we've looked outwards and we've looked towards Jesus, but we can also look inside ourselves when we think about what it means to be salt and light Christians. How does God bring salt and light there? We know He can shine in the dark places, and heal wounds, fears, anxieties. Like the advert for toilet ducks, he can clean the places other cleaners don't reach. If we look at the fruits of the Holy Spirit on the

banner, these all spring from inside us, from our hearts and minds and attitudes. They describe the person God can make out of us when we accept his living power to transform us. In Romans 12: 2 Paul wrote 'do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will'. Jesus shines in dark places within us, and brings flavour if we feel insipid. He purifies and heals, two other things that salt was used for in the past.

I believe most of us, if not all, have some areas where we want God to reach with his salt and light, and we're going to have a short time of quiet prayer about that in a few minutes. It's corny to say it, but this series of services about the beatitudes is a journey, and going on a journey allows us to see new things, and changes us. Let's start this series with expectation, praying for the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to reach us and bring to us those characteristics of salt and light which Jesus spoke about. As they penetrate us, we will have the strength to live on our frontlines, and touch others.

While the music plays, I'd ask you to pray for Jesus' salt and light in your own life. Let us listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to each one of us about being salt and light Christians....

Loving Father, we thank you for your flavouring, purifying, healing power and your light which shines in our lives and can never be put out.

Sing: Take my Life and let it be
Consecrated Lord to thee
Take my moments and my days
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.
