

Anglican Church Noosa
February 5, 2023
Matthew 5:13-16
BEST. SERMON. EVER. - Salt and Light
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We're doing a three week mini-series looking at a portion of just one chapter. Not even the whole chapter. Just a few verses from Matthew chapter 5, which is part of the famous Sermon on the Mount.

In Matthew, there are five major teaching episodes from Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount is the first one. It's basically a condensed description of how someone who belongs to the Kingdom of God should live. Matthew 5, 6 and 7.

I'm guessing that you'd agree that living as a Christian in our blip of an era is an increasingly tough gig here in the West.

Remember what Andrew Thorburn went through last year, and I'm sure he's still going through the repercussions of his hasty departure from being Essendon CEO for about a day.

And what does our world look like at the moment?

There are so many destructive habits, attitudes, and new norms that we're seeing, and alongside that, many of the freedoms we've taken for granted, like freedom of speech and freedom of association, are slowly but clearly disintegrating before our eyes.

And we have the Sermon on the Mount.

Here's what Jesus says to his people -

Blessed are the poor in spirit

Blessed are those who mourn

Blessed are the meek

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Blessed are the merciful

Blessed are the pure in heart

Blessed are the peacemakers

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

Blessed are you when people insult you and speak evil of you.

Really?!?

And in that context he said - you are salt, you are light.

Salt stops things going bad. Light gets rid of the dark.

It's that simple really. Salt stops things going bad and light gets rid of the dark.

During this week, as I was thinking about salt, my mind went to all the different types of preservatives there are these days. Preservation and conservation are words we hear just about every day.

And we live in a world that is full of preservatives.

And most of them are additives to our food in the form of chemicals.

Some of them may be natural preservatives, but there's plenty of artificial ones.

I did a quick bit of research to try to understand all the food additive numbers that we find on labelling. It's a bit overwhelming. But some people have to check all these numbers before they buy a product, because of food allergies. Perhaps that's your experience and practice to keep yourself safe.

I scrolled through a list and here's what I found

There are well over 300 different additives here, and many of them are preservatives.

But for millenia, there have been just a handful, and the two important ones were sugar and salt.

Jesus said to his disciples - You are the salt of the earth.

Pliny, who was a Roman naturalist and philosopher, lived in the same era as Jesus, and he said "Nothing is more useful than salt and sunshine".

Salt and light - such common things.

Salt was used in the ancient world to flavour food and even in small doses as a fertiliser, but above all, it was used as a preservative. It was rubbed into meat, and it would slow down decay.

But it needed to be used wisely, or salt could actually be detrimental. It could heal, but it could also make you sick. Small doses could fertilise, but large doses would cause a field to become infertile. In fact if a country invaded another country, they would often would put salt on the fields to make them unusable, and the people, unable to provide for themselves, would be dependant on the conquering nation.

Salt was highly valuable. In fact, in ancient times, it was used to pay soldiers. And that is where the word salary comes from. 'Sal' is Latin for salt. So if someone 'was not worth his salt' they hadn't earned their pay!

Salt is one of the most common substances on earth.
It can't be destroyed by fire; it can't be destroyed by time.

I must admit that I have a bit of a laugh when I read the label on the salt I buy today, and it tells me the use by date. Trust me, you can ignore that one. The salt we buy has been around a very long time. I don't think it's going to go off in my pantry.

So why in this passage does Jesus say that salt that has lost its saltiness needs to be thrown out?
Well, it's because in many places where salt was sourced in those days, like salt marshes, and not by evaporation of salt water, there were lots of impurities mixed in with it.
The actual salt, which was more soluble than the impurities, would leach out, leaving a residue so weak, it was of little worth.

The residue still looked like salt, but wasn't actually salt.

The point is that, if Jesus' disciples are to act as a preservative in the world by living out the kingdom norms and values, we can only achieve that if we hold on to those kingdom values and not succumb to the norms and values of this world.

You see, these few short verses are about mission.
They are about being on task for Jesus wherever we are, whatever we do, every day of the week.
This isn't just talking about what we do in church, or what church ministry we might have. This is talking about our everyday existence.

Who do we meet? Who do we talk to?
Who do we email? Who do we phone?
What people do we engage with when we call up a company?
What sort of conversation do we have at the school gate? at the checkout, at the gym, at the dog park, on the boat, in the library, in the pub or the restaurant?
at the beach? in the coffee shop? on the bike ride?

As a Jesus person, you are salt, you are light every day of the week.

It's not just about coming to church, it's also about what we do for the other 6 1/2 days of each week.
The coming together as the gathered people, is so vital. We need it. And we need it regularly.
In the big group on a Sunday, and in smaller groups during the week.

From being the gathered community here on a Sunday, we become the scattered community for the week, and that in that scattering, we are on mission, we are his salt and his light.

And that's one of the reasons we end each worship service committing ourselves and commissioning ourselves for mission. We are living sacrifices, we say, committed to love and proclaim Jesus.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord we say.

Have a look at this video, it's obviously from the UK so just be aware of that context and how it's described.

You see the gospel has penetrating power and we are to be transformed by it. Salt and Light. Salt has to be salty. and Light needs to shine.

The sermon on the mount generally, and this section specifically, is a radical call to radical discipleship.

In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, the great John Stott says -

"This sermon is the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament of the Christian counterculture. Here is a Christian value-system, ethical standard, religious devotion, attitude to money, ambition, lifestyle and network of relationships - all of which are totally at variance with those of the non-Christian world."

In the 21st century, with its post-modernism, or probably more accurately its post post-modernism, and its all-consuming materialism, a life of faith doesn't come easily.

As followers of Jesus we need to be constantly reminded that God loves and cares for us, and will provide.

So as we trust him, we don't have to prioritise those things, but we can learn to focus on the true priorities that we need to - which is being the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

What a challenge that is!

This seems to be saying that wherever Christians are, life should be more interesting and pleasant.

Isn't that what salt and light does?

As you reflect on your saltiness, and the shining of your light, are you making life more pleasant for those you engage each day?

Are we making the good things better, and the bad things less bad?

That is our task as we live out our kingdom lives.

We are to bring light to the world, and we are to bring the world to the light.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a city on a hill. It's impossible for a city on a hill to be hidden.

And, often the buildings were made of white limestone, so even in the daytime with the sun shining on them, the city would shine out. And of course, at night time, the lights would be seen through the windows.

He continues with the absurd illustration of lighting a lamp and then covering it up. Nothing could be more ridiculous.

If we make the light of Christ invisible in our lives, then we are just as useless as salt residue, or a light under a bowl.

We are to let our light shine, so we glorify our Father in heaven.

And as we grow in our character, so we should grow in our influence.

Our character should be shaped by the beatitudes, and our influence is through being salt and light.

When we grow in those things, we will find blessing, the world will be well served, and what's the result of that?

The Father is glorified.

These short 4 verses we're looking at this week, put mission at the heart of the disciples' lives. These 4 verses should put mission at the heart of our lives.

We are directed to transform the world.

I want to finish with a quote from Tom Wright ...

"This was truly revolutionary, and at the same time deeply in tune with the ancient stories and promises of the Bible. And the remarkable thing is that Jesus brought it all into reality in his own person. He was the salt of the earth. He was the light of the world: set up on a hill-top, crucified for all the world to see, becoming a beacon of hope and new life for everybody, drawing people to worship his father."

Lord, help us to be salt. Help us to be light. Amen.