

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR LIKE SALT

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 05 February 2017

Matthew 5:13-20

[MW17-03]

One of the things I really used to enjoy when I was at primary school

- was Saturday morning
especially in the winter when I would lie in bed reading

One of my favourite sorts of books was collections of stories

- and it was there, many many years ago, one Saturday morning
I first came across a story about a king who had three beautiful daughters
- that's the way it is in such stories

Anyway, this king must have been a bit insecure

- as well as something of a tyrant and not very good making judgements about people
one day this king called in his three daughters
and asked them how they loved him
- now the eldest two daughters knew what this was about
and what it was leading up to
they were worldly-wise and knew just what to say

The eldest daughter said to her father, the king: "I love you like sugar"

- the king smiled, gave her a hug
and rewarded her with some expensive baubles and trinkets
- the middle daughter said to the king: "I love you like honey"
and she too received a smile, a hug and some goodies

When it came to the youngest daughter's turn

- she told the king: "I love you like salt"
"Salt!" roared the king. "You don't love me at all. How dare you insult me like that!"
- then he either banished his youngest daughter or she ran away
I can't remember which
either way she was destined to spend the rest of her days as a beggar
- that king, as well as his personality faults and failures as a parent
obviously didn't know the value of salt!

"You are the salt of the earth"

- those words introduce today's reading from Matthew's gospel
Jesus certainly knew the value and importance of salt
- Jesus knew exactly what he was telling his disciples when he said
they were the *salt* of the *earth*

Salt is extremely useful ...

- before we move on, let's see how many uses for salt we can come up with
(prize for each one)
[melt snow, fertiliser ...]

In the ancient world salt was highly valued - the Greeks called salt divine

- in a kind of Latin jingle the Romans said
there is nothing more useful than sun and salt
- salt was connected with three special qualities
the first was purity:
no doubt salt's glistening whiteness made this connection easy

- the Romans said salt was the purest of all things because it came from the purest of all things: the sun and the sea
- so then for followers of Jesus to be the “salt of the earth” they are to be an example of purity

Secondly, in the ancient world, salt was the most common preservative

- it was used to keep things from going bad salt preserves from corruption
- for followers of Jesus to be the “salt of the earth” they are to have an antiseptic influence on life

Thirdly, the greatest and most obvious quality of salt, is that it lends flavour to things

- food without salt is bland and flat (just ask any Masterchef judge!)
- followers of Jesus are to be in life what salt is to food followers of Jesus are to lend flavour to life

Sadly, often people connect following Jesus with just the opposite

- with taking the zest and spice out of life the Emperor Julian who ruled at a time when Christianity was the religion of the empire complained that Christianity took the vividness out of life
- Robert Louis Stephenson wrote in his diary as if he was recording something exceedingly unusual: “I have been to church today and am not depressed”
- that's not what Jesus meant!

In a worried world, Christians are to be the ones who remain serene

- in a depressed world, Christians are to be the ones who remain full of the joy of life
- wherever we are, if we are to truly be the salt of the earth we are to be the diffusers of joy

It is interesting, no more than that, important to note

- that this metaphor of “salt” as used by Jesus' is applied to Christians *collectively*, and not *individually* it is the disciples as a group who are to be the salt of the earth
- in the same way today, it is as a group of believers that Christians are to be salt within the community
- we here in the Mangawhai Mission District have a responsibility to be the salt in our surrounding community
- today Jesus says to us: people of Christ the King, you are the salt of the earth
- you are important, you are useful, you are valuable you are a gift to the people around you

What gifts do we have to offer our community???

- what gifts do we as a church have to offer the people who live in our community? [space for thinking and answering ...]
- some things I thought of are ...

Of course, some of the things which we offer

- notably companionship, hospitality, help in times of trouble are perhaps not unique to us
- but I believe the underlying basis, our motivation, our philosophy our way of looking at the world is very distinctive
- in these days when the bottom line, budgets and political expediency rule we believe in the importance of people and people values because each and every person is accepted and loved by God as and where they are

We as a church represent a distinctive point of view regarding

- efficiency, economics, material possessions, power, status, politics and the expediency of the moment
- we represent a God who gave us his own son, Jesus Christ not only to challenge worldly values but to show us the real treasures that we have
- among these real treasures are: faith, hope, love time to spend with people, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation prayer, healing and miracles

As a church we have very distinctive gifts

- something which nobody else in our community has to offer something which our community desperately needs
- our responsibility as followers of Jesus, as “salt of the earth” is to be aware of these gifts, shake things up a bit, share them around

You see, Jesus does not say “If you do this ...” or “When you've learnt that ...”

- *then, then* you will be the salt of the earth
Jesus says categorically, plain and simple: you *are*: you *are* the salt of the earth
- we are the salt of the earth
whatever we do, or don't do, we are still the salt of the earth
- but, Jesus continues, *but* if the salt loses its saltiness how can it be made salty again?

Biblical scholars have attempted to work out the meaning of “salt” in this saying of Jesus

- salt as a preservative of soundness in society
or salt as a transforming agent in society; these have some truth
- but it seems to me what is important here is the distinctive flavour of salt the Christian Church is meant to be as different from the world around it as salt water is from fresh - as different as 'chalk and cheese' we might say

The warning here is that we may lose our distinctive flavour

- if this happens, and the church is indistinguishable from the world it is useless to God and to humanity
- this saying of Jesus is not a mere summons to good works it is a deep spiritual challenge
- and a warning not to rest on any laurels we think we may have

Have you ever put salt in something by mistake – thought it was something else?

- I once added baking soda instead of icing sugar when whipping cream but that's another story ...
- another story that used to fascinate me was part of a series about an oddball family the mother got up one morning and put salt in her coffee instead of sugar

- now I don't know why she didn't just tip it out and make another cup but she tried adding all sorts of things, even asked neighbours' advice however nothing she did could get rid of the salty taste

Here's another angle on salt from Sandra Herrmann, who writes:

Forget everything you have ever heard about this passage. Forget the sermons on the flatness of food without salt. Forget that salt was used as money in many parts of the world. Forget that the ovens in which bread was baked were lined with salt, and that when enough grease had dripped on it to make it no longer savour the food, this salt was thrown out to keep the paths free from weeds, to be trampled underfoot. Forget that salt cures meat, heals wounds, removes bitterness from wine. Wipe it all out of your mind, and learn a new thing about salt. In ancient times, salt was considered to be the one thing that could never be denatured. Mix it with water and you get salty water. Put it in soup and you get salty soup. Add it to other ingredients as you might, it is incorruptible. It was seen, in other words, as a gift from heaven to humankind as a sign of the holy in the world. Salt, therefore, became the medium by which things were dedicated to God. To purify an offering, one rubbed it with salt. To sanctify an altar, one sprinkled it with salt. To polish the holy brass lampstands in the Temple, one rubbed them with salt. Salt was the sign of the holy, the purifier. It was the universally understood symbol for the work of God in the world, for this use of salt transcended cultural boundaries, as well. Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Assyrians, and Hebrews, all understood that salt sanctifies. Now hear this passage again. "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" You, I, we are the means by which God seeks to make the world holy. But if we cannot – will not – accomplish this; if we become "unholy" – then what? If not through us, by what means will God sanctify this world, created to be perfect but fallen into pollution and desecration? If we, who call ourselves "children of God," will not be holy, will not be used to sanctify, will not allow ourselves to be purified, with what shall God's will be done? How shall the salt be made salty again?

Oh, and, yes ... remember that story I mentioned at the beginning

- about the king and his three daughters???
- after some time passed the youngest daughter returned to the palace and found work in the kitchen
- eventually she managed to remove all the salt from the kitchen and the cooking the king was unable to enjoy his meals and after a while went storming down to the kitchen very angry, very upset, very hungry: "What's the meaning of this!" he roared
- at that moment the youngest daughter revealed herself "Father, I love you like salt"
- the king hung his head in shame ... at last he understood he and his youngest daughter were reconciled, and they all lived happily ever after because that's the way it is in such stories

We are the salt of the earth

- we are able to be the salt of the earth through Jesus Christ because Jesus is the one who gives life flavour, meaning and preservation
- we are to share this life, flavour, meaning and preservation with our surrounding community
- we are to be the means by which the world will be made holy

Or to put it another way: we are to love our neighbours like salt!