

# Showing your Salt and your Light

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 9 February, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Epiphany 5A

Isaiah 58:1-9a; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5: 13-20

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhjzbZ\\_nOU0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhjzbZ_nOU0)

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Pick a subject, any subject ... politics, religion, (don't know if it's discussed that much in Pitt's Uniting Church, but) sport. Those are the perennial subjects. and now for a few current ones you might think of: bushfires, climate change, fossil fuels, renewable energy, coronavirus, Christmas Island (again), refugees - and the list goes on - and I know that many of you will be thinking of many other things that you could discuss.

But read, or listen to, or watch the news, whether the professional or the social media, whether tabloid, shock jock or the ABC - you will get the spin, and you have the choice of either inter-acting, absorbing, getting angry with, scoffing at ... or simply letting it through to the keeper (to use the sporting analogy). With the very mention of Facebook, you will understand the issue of whether to respond in support or opposition when you see a post. Or whether to totally flick it away with a contempt like it was a fly on your fore-arm and just move on.

Jesus had a way of communicating a point, and in the Gospel according to Matthew, after the Sermon on the Mount when he preached the Beatitudes - blessed are they, blessed are you when ... He then spoke to his disciples about being salt and light. That is, salty salt and exposed light. And we may ask ourselves the question: *What did he mean?*

The trouble with reading the bible and trying to find meaning from its possible interpretations, is that it always leads to debate and the want for tangible answers. But then, that is what many of us like, that containable answer that can be put away in a box, and stored away until the subject becomes relevant again. But the writers of the bible did not intend, and neither did Jesus, those definitive answers for a particular time and place that would later become stagnant in another time and place.

The first hearers, as are we, were and are left with having to use their and our own imaginations and experiences in life, to make sense and meaning of what we have heard this morning. As for Jesus' teachings, they are spiced with riddle and multi-meanings. The options of interpretation and meaning are many. So it would not be surprising that all of us have our own spin on the meaning of salt and light. We've already heard it from the children this morning.

Even if you have only heard this story for the first time, you will have an idea that it is not about salt and light, but more about how to conduct ourselves in life itself. However, very typical of Jesus, when offering teaching through story or metaphor, he offered the hearer a way in via something they already knew.

And we already know about salt and light. Salt and light were two things that were everyday necessities for everyone. Sill are, as they were two thousand years ago.

Like today, as in first century Palestine, salt as well as being a preservative, was a common additive in cooking to enhance the flavour of much food, and we've already heard that today. It was an almost automatic action to add a pinch of salt on food before eating. Salt always added to the flavour, so was the belief of many, and I confess to agreeing with many who put salt on their food.

Even the fast food-chains know that the essential ingredients to getting people to crave their products, would be to add fat, sugar and salt. Any teenager studying food technology can tell you that, and would fess up to craving chomping on any products from the major fast food outlets. And any chemist would be able to tell you that sodium chloride (salt) in its purest form never loses its taste.

So what is Jesus talking about? And so begin the questions of interpreting metaphors that were commonly used 2000 years ago. And try telling a child of today about lamp stands and placing them under a bushel basket (whatever that is), when they know, lamps and lights are usually switched on from a wall or a switch on an electric cord.

I was afraid of the dark when I was a child – and I used to have a bedroom when I was about six years old, which I shared with my sister who was two years younger than me. I was terrified of the dark, because there are noises at night-time. There was one particular time when my sister kicked a ball off herbed and it went boomp. It got underneath my bed and it went boomp boom bbbbb. I was convinced that there was something nasty under my bed. So, I was like this for the rest of the night, not budging. But, in the morning, when I looked under the bed, there was a ball! I tried to simulate the situation and, sure enough, I told myself that there are no nasty things in the dark.

Access to light is important for a child whose imagination runs rampant at night, so that light switch is very important. Light reveals that there is nothing nasty under the bed or in the cupboard, but light also reveals the starkness and beauty of truth and what is actually there.

It was Plato, the Greek philosopher who said: *One can easily understand a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when an adult is afraid of the light ...* and it would be ever so easy to go off on a tangent at this point to comment on some media and some politicians who do not like to see the light!. But, here we are, people of Pitt St Uniting Church and visitors, to hear the liberating and life giving gospel.

When stories of salt and light were told 2000 years ago, people understood immediately about salt losing its taste because salt came with all sorts of impurities, and a lamp being obscured by anything, was a preposterous use of light. Even today, we understand perfectly the image of a city build on a hill that cannot be hidden. It is there to be seen and to be fully exposed for everyone, friend and foe alike.

The question that has to be asked was the one that Jesus posed, *“how can saltiness be restored?”* Jesus was not asking a scientific question, but a question of what could be possible. It did not say, in the Bible, that saltiness cannot be restored. That is a question that no one would know the answer, simply because the people of the time knew very well what it meant when salt lost its saltiness. There was no return. It meant that it was useless and its fate was for it to be thrown away. Tragic, especially when salt was used as a form of currency.

But remember, Jesus' use of the image of salt, was a metaphor and a way into understanding his teaching, and you could almost anticipate that a Godly point was about to be made.

And here is the rub ... so to speak. Added to the value of salt, Jesus clearly personalises it by saying to his hearers: *you are the salt ... you are the salt of the earth*, he says. The sting is palpable when worthless salt, Jesus says, is thrown out. What is his point?

Faith gone to pot is worse than useless, it is deplorable! It is tragic! The point of hope is that though we cannot restore saltiness, God can. We're talking metaphors here. And that is the point, what we cannot do, God can. We've heard of this before. We've heard it so many times before, since our childhood days and teenage days.

God can do the impossible - or what we think is impossible. What we think is impossible is possible for God.

How often is it, when you have felt that you have botched up, made a mistake, felt shamed about doing or not doing something, are in a complete mess, you know what that light is like! We think that there is no way out; tried everything and failed, felt a loss of pride, felt devalued, been hurt and damaged. We've been there. Hit rock bottom, felt defenceless and utterly disempowered and cannot pick ourselves up.

Have you lost your salt? When all that happened, have you lost your salt? You probably thought that there was no way back to regaining your saltiness.

That point of helplessness, that point when you thought that you had been thrown out and trampled upon, is that point when faith in God emerges. Faith in God emerges when we realise that we cannot do it. Faith in God happens when you have tried everything you can, and exhausted yourself of your own resources. Faith in God happens when you acknowledge that you cannot go it alone. Faith in God happens when you show yourself as you are, and begin to trust others with your vulnerability. Faith in God happens when you open your eyes and discover that in your brokenness and in your despair, you are in the Kin-dom of God. That is when the Kin-dom of God is experienced.

Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world. We do not look at ourselves, but we show ourselves to be the light of the world - and we see others who are the light of the world. So, you are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth. How do we know this, because we just heard it in the Bible. Jesus said so. You are the light. You are light. You are salt!

So go and be salty, go and show your light, and the people who experience you will also experience God. Conversely, accept the saltiness of others and the light that they show, and you will know that you are in the Kin-dom of God.

You are the salt of the earth. Let people taste you. You are the light of the world. Let people see you.

The people of salt and light do that. That is what we do.

Why?

Because Jesus said so.