

Overflowing

Sunday 20 September 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas

Matthew 5:13-16

Salt and Light

Sandra and I made a day trip from Acapulco in Mexico to a beautiful ancient town in the mountains called Taxco. It's famous for its silver jewellery, meant to be the cheapest in the world. But it is not the jewellery I remember Taxco for. We made friends with a couple of Mexican people on our way up to Taxco and we went with them up on to a small roof top café, very Mexican, looking over the ancient town. The waitress came out and put bread rolls and some guacamole on the table. I was really hungry and I love guacamole, so I took a great big scoop of this guacamole, put it on a piece of bread and put it in my mouth. As I was doing this I caught out of the corner of my eye a look of disbelief on the faces of our Mexican friends. But it was too late. In it went. It looked like guacamole. It had the consistency of guacamole. It was in fact a paste made out of the hottest chillies you can get. It was outrageously hot. It just exploded in my mouth. Evidently I went bright red, I coughed and spluttered and tried to pour water down my throat. I had tears rolling down my cheeks. I wasn't the only one with tears rolling down my cheeks. My lovely wife, my compassionate, caring wife, also had tears rolling down her cheeks, only her tears were accompanied by laughter, obviously it was very funny. Our Mexican friends are still talking about the crazy Kiwis they met.

I was reminded of this experience when I came to the scripture reading for today. The salt and the light. It's an account we know well. But one thing that has often puzzled people is Jesus' words, 'If salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men'.

How can salt lose its saltiness. Salt is evidently one of the most stable of compounds. Salt doesn't lose its saltiness. Well not salt as we know it. Much of the salt used around Galilee, came from the Dead Sea. It wasn't particularly pure. The sandy soil around the Dead Sea is the colour and consistency of salt. So what was popularly called salt was in fact a white powder which contained sodium chloride, but also much else. There were no refineries in those days. Of this salt, the sodium chloride was probably the most soluble compound and so the most easily washed out. The residue of white powder, still looked like salt and was still called salt, but it neither tasted or acted like salt. It was just road dust.

These few verses we are looking at today come from Jesus' teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' outline early in his ministry of the characteristics of disciples of Jesus, a follower of Jesus. The people who eventually formed the church that we are part of today. Jesus' words are personal and direct. You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.

We touched briefly a couple of weeks ago on the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. Both the Beatitudes and in the analogies of salt and light, it is clear that the Church and the world are distinct communities. When we worked through the nature of God, that we looked at over the last few months, we saw God's call is for a people who are different. A counter culture, a holy nation. This call is not relaxed in the dawn of the Christian era, but rather if we take the Sermon on the Mount to heart we could well say that it is strengthened.

A people who will, with contrite hearts, recognising their own poverty in spirit, recognising the same in others, thirsting for things to be different both for themselves and God's world.

People with no agenda but the reconciliation of man to man, man to God. A people that will be persecuted for this desire. A people very different to the world. And Jesus highlights this distinctiveness again. On the one hand there is the earth, and on the other there is you who are to be the salt of the earth. On the one hand there is the world, and on the other there is you who are to be light of the world. The two communities, they and you, them and us, the world and the church – they are related to each other but it is a relationship of distinctive difference.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a comfortable message to hear. If the Church is not distinctively different from the world, if we are not a counter culture, a different world view, different values, different goals, we are not the church of Jesus Christ. Despite what we may call ourselves. And Jesus puts it personally. Just how different from the world am I?

But wait there is more.

On one hand there is the strident, confident, dogmatic, tough, hard world, on the other hand there are the poor and the meek, the mourners and the merciful, those who try to make peace not war and there aren't that many of them. And they will be persecuted. Surely they will be crushed. Not so says Jesus, the Church is called to serve the persecuting world. Incredible as it may sound, Jesus says, at first to a handful of Palestine peasants – 'you are the salt of the earth, the light of the world'.

What does salt do? It adds flavour, or accentuates flavour. If you can taste the salt then it is too much salt. Except perhaps on fish and chips. I assume salt was used in Jesus' day to bring out flavour in food, but that was not its primary function. Centuries before refrigeration salt was used to preserve food, particularly meat and fish. It was used to stop decay, to stop the rot. The church doesn't stand on its own. God has given us worldly governments, the ability to make laws etc and also the home, marriage and family life intended to bring a wholesome influence in the community. But the agency most directly charged with halting, preventing, challenging the decay of society, is the church. We are to be the salt of the earth. I don't think being the salt of the earth is intended to be a fun thing. It means speaking out against the immorality, the pornography, the injustice, the indifference, the abuse, the usury, the exploitation, all the ways in which the world becomes a putrefied, smelly, decayed version of what it is created to be.

You are the salt of the earth. Not called to be some sort of church salt shakers, let's keep ourselves apart from the grubbiness of the world. Its not good enough to say the world's in a bad way, I'm so glad I am not part of it. Outrageously Jesus says you are the salt. If the world is in decay it is your responsibility, you are the salt. Sometimes I get embarrassed with Christians always being against things. The cosmic killjoy image. But I think that is my problem. Salt has a sting to it, a bite to it. Some of us need to be reminded that Jesus didn't say you are the honey of the world. He said you are the salt of the earth. Salt bites and the unadulterated message of the judgement and grace of God has always been a biting thing. You are the salt of the earth, but you are also the light of the world. Later he says, 'I am the light of the world,' meaning himself, but there is no contradiction there, it just means that we are called to shine with the light of Christ. The source of our light. What is the light? It is good works. We can be inclined to see good works in terms of things that we do, the care that we show for our fellow human beings. And it is certainly those things, but it is much more than that. The Old Testament prophecy is that God's servant would be a light to the nations. This is fulfilled in Christ and in those who bear witness to Christ.

The suggestion is that everything a Christian says or does, is good works.

That brings me to why I have titled this message 'Overflowing'.

A Christian can lose his or her saltiness – we are painfully aware of that aren't we. We do hide our Christ light. We are not transparent in all we do. I once heard of a lady who said she was going to stop censoring her language. When asked what she meant, she said, as a family we go to church on Sunday morning, then we might go out for lunch, visit my husband's mother in the afternoon. At work the next day when someone says what did you do yesterday, I say went out for lunch, visited my mother-in-law!

We hide the light of Christ. Being the salt of the earth, light of the world, sounds tiring, sounds like hard work. And it is tiring, hard work, fruitless if done out of our energy.

Starting place is to bask more deeply in the light of Christ.

Recently we have been going deeper into God and developing relational groups and encouraging personal prayer.

Don't take on the world, take on Christ, more and more, and the Spirit will flow out from you as you overflow. Salt of the earth, light of the world.

'If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' *John 7:37-38*