

⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Mark 9

My brother in law from New Zealand gives nice presents. Not that they’re expensive or fashionable – but more usually because they are different and a lot of thought goes into them.

He gave me a book entitled “Salt – a world history”.¹ Wait a minute, I thought. How can salt have a world history? It sits on our tables in little glass containers and you sprinkle it – provided it hasn’t got damp and sticky – over your food. Doctors tell us to be careful of our intake, and we spread it on snowy roads. Isn’t that about the whole story? But, of course, the truth is that Salt has been indispensable in shaping our lives as humankind.

Let me quickly – because it is very relevant – remind you a little of how important salt has been in the human story.

Human beings have used salt for thousands of years. Saltworks in Shanxi in China date back to at least 6000 BC – 8000 years ago. Salt was placed in Egyptian tombs.

300 years before Christ, salt fish were being exported in trade throughout the Mediterranean. Wars have been fought over salt. Salt taxes upheld empires. Great trade routes across the known world had tolls placed on them to charge for salt passing through. Just think of the names of some European cities. Salzach. Salzburg. In Medieval times, salt was extracted by monks from the flats at Prestonpans, just to the east of our city. And in India in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi led at least 100,000 people on the salt march in which protesters made their own salt from the sea, which was illegal as it avoided paying the "salt tax". This civil disobedience inspired millions of common people, and began the overthrow of British rule in India.

So this salt business has tremendous significance for not only our history but also our present.

And here Jesus takes this most basic of elements – well understood – and applies it to life itself – and indeed to the life of the Christian. The gospel seems to challenge us here. Elsewhere, Jesus says to us through the disciples – “You are salt to the world”.

It seems that the challenge here is to see that salt is what we are to represent in the world. It is to be a symbol of our life within the church. Being salty is what identifies a Christian – more than that, being salty is what allows us to influence the world, in the name of Jesus.

What does this mean – this strange idea that Jesus has –that you are indeed salt?

Let us think of some of those properties that make salt “salt”.

SALT – a valuable element of trade and commerce.

Ed Nash got me thinking the other evening. At the Kirk Session we were talking about the way in which we take posters and publicity from people all over the place and clutter up our noticeboards with material that no-one will ever have the intention of doing anything about.

¹ Salt – A world history: Mark Kurlansky. Vintage 2003

Ed said words to the effect of: “If we do that sort of thing then maybe we are not valuing who we are highly enough!”

Yes the Church has value. How could it not – seeing who our Lord is and what is the mission we have been given. And yet sometimes we act very differently from that. We talk ourselves down. We don’t believe the world wants to hear us. So we sit in a corner and mumble about how times have changed for the worse. And so we create a self-fulfilling prophecy – because things will change for the worse if we will them to do just that.

But, you know, I think that none of that is true. Certainly in my experience the world still looks to the church for its voice, its opinion, and especially its leadership in some of the questions that beset life. We are salt to the world – and that means appreciating our importance and our value.

SALT – an element of healing

With a limited pharmacopeia available in Jesus day, salt was an important medication and had a part to play in sterilising and in healing diseases and infirmities. It may have been crude, but it is what people had.

The Church’s job, our job, embraces that too. In times when men and women suffer from a degree of uneasiness, anxiety, disassociation – all the standard pathology of the way we live – the church can, and should, offer healing. We are able to speak about a Christ who addresses the spirit within us in a way that lifts and fills our emptiness. And what we do believe – is that very same spiritual process can have its effects on our whole well-being – physical and mental too.

SALT – a preservative

This was a very important role for salt through the ages. If you wished to preserve your foodstuffs then salt was a good medium to do just that. Salt will maintain and keep things alive and fresh for longer.

I had an e-mail from Christine yesterday. Her first week in Lebanon has gone fine, and she misses us all badly. But remember what we said at her farewell last week. Christine’s first contact with MUC was when she passed our noticeboard 5 years ago and read a poster that said: “We believe in life before death!” That was the Christian Aid slogan that year. But actually it said something massively important about the task of the church.

Our task is not to preside over death – but to embrace life – in all its fullness. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we are to offer life – when politics and banks and newspapers and all the levers of society are obsessed with decline and death – we have here promises that go far beyond what we can touch, or pocket, or spend. We are to keep life itself alive and fresh.

SALT – the giver of flavour and taste

What we add to life should make it taste better. Simple as that. I know many attractive gatherings of God’s people – I hope and believe we are one. I know too some that are deeply unattractive. Unwelcoming and always fighting among themselves. Where the people come to the church on a Sunday set to hurt their fellow congregants.

When the visitor comes in is their day made more flavoursome? Do they leave with a better taste in their mouths? Hardly! Salt – that’s us – should bring taste to the tasteless and flavour to something that does not have any flavour.

Now all this is to speak of, to represent, a life that is salty – in other words restored, renewed, and transformed- this life of a Christian. In the process of becoming and being salt to the world, we are brought face to face with important truths about what makes us tick.

But hold on – what is the picture that Jesus draws in his words to the disciples?

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You see if salt is so important to life, and if our saltiness is so important to the wellbeing of God’s world as we find it in our community – then what indeed happens when it loses its saltiness?

The most common way that salt loses its saltiness is by being diluted – and we may want to think about that – but let’s be sure of one thing. This saltiness is so important that our integrity as Christians, and the world that we serve, both depend on it.

Our lives indeed – if they are to make that difference – must be restored, renewed, forgiven, transformed. It is a massive calling. But it is vital and inescapable.

How will you, how will our congregation, show our saltiness this week? How will we make a difference? How will we ensure that we never lose our savour in the task of bringing those around us to see a loving and transforming God?