



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday before Lent

readings: [Isaiah 58.1-9a](#), [1 Corinthians 2.1-12](#), [Matthew 5.13-20](#)

5 February 2023

St Matthew 5 v 13 -20

The next three weeks' readings from St Matthew's Gospel, all taken from the Sermon on the Mount, introduce us to the ethical teaching of Jesus.

Today's reading, found straight after the Beatitudes and before Jesus begins to reinterpret the law, puts what Jesus is about to say in perspective. Jesus carves out a space between, on the one hand, those who would say that the law no longer matters and on the other hand those who misinterpret the law by laying the emphasis on its outward action – he has the Pharisees in mind. Jesus wishes to recover the connection between the attitude of heart and the outward form. Jesus wants to go below the surface and remove the discrepancy between thought and word, and action.

I'm going to leave this rather tricky terrain to those preaching over the next few weeks! This is because I want to focus on the first part of today's Gospel reading.

Jesus says: 'You - plural, together - are the salt of the earth'. 'You - plural together - are the light of the world'. The small group around Jesus - the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the persecuted – this is the community through which the one who is the light of the world becomes light throughout the world. This is the community that through its actions – and its important to note that Jesus in his teaching is not focusing on our understanding but our actions – through its good works is salt to the earth.

To grasp what's being said about the community gathered around Jesus it's important to get away from the domestic picture of the salt cellar on the dining-room table or the corner table lamp in the living-room.

Think of the salt fields that you might see, for example, in the Canary Islands where a specialist industry cultivates different grades of salt from the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Think of the salt mines across Europe producing natural salt from the depths of the earth. Salt pervades the whole of human life, it has its own economics, it's an industry, it's a vital commodity without which human life would either not flourish or even not exist at all.

Think of light in the public world: that lights up a whole house, that lights cities enabling active human life 24/7. Think back into the Old Testament. When Jesus speaks to his disciples, he reaches back to Israel's past to the vision of a city set upon a mountain towards which all the nations of the world head at the end of time and shape their lives according to God's will. Jesus is saying nothing less than this: those gathered around him in all their fragility and diversity are the longed-for community of God's people around whom the world will come to shape its life and values, the community to whom the peoples of the world will look to for truth and guidance.

So how are we to respond in our time and place to Jesus' vision for this new people, this embryonic church of which we are now part. How are we to be salt and light? How are we to live out together this vision?

First, we live out our calling as we are. Jesus said you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world; not you should be salt, you should be light. This is what you are as my disciples – salt and light. I am reminded of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about the community gathered around Jesus in the Cost of Discipleship, his most famous book, written under the increasing and dangerous threat of Nazism during the 1930s:

Now [Jesus describes the community]using the image of the most indispensable commodity on earth. They are the salt of the earth. They are the noblest asset, the highest value the world possesses. Without them the earth can no longer survive. The earth is preserved by salt; the world lives because of these poor ignoble and weak people whom the world rejects. It destroys its own life by driving out the disciples, and Yet the earth may continue to live because of those outcasts.

Bonhoeffer's words can encourage us. We don't have to qualify to be disciples by going on a course. We are not in preparation to follow Jesus. We are disciples today at this moment in time, and each of us brings our experience to the life of the church and plays a part in the body of the church. In our fragility as followers of the risen Jesus each one of us has a part to play in God's plan for creation. It may sometimes feel as though we are out of step with the world, that the church is ignored, that we are not up to the task given to us, that we have too many inadequacies, that we are too divided to make a difference but as salt is indispensable to human living, so the church, through God's grace, is indispensable to the project of God's kingdom.

And if this is the case, we need to pay attention to our life together as the people whom God loves and embraces. This coming week the House of Bishops proposals resulting from the Living in Love and Faith process go to General Synod for discussion. If you have not read them then you can find the link to the papers through the notice in the Cathedral Flag. Across the church there are those who take the view that they do not go far enough. But there are those who say the proposals to bless those in same sex relationships go too far.

I welcome the bishops' proposals as a significant step forward but like the bishops themselves wish to acknowledge, and I quote, that 'we have reached one milestone, but there is further to go as we seek God's coming kingdom together'.

The way that the church lives with and debates and follows through on these proposals to bless persons in same sex relationships is something that informs how we are salt, how we are light. We have talked so much about living with different views within the church. We have debated the concept of learning to disagree well with each other. Living with diversity and difference and doing it well is part of our calling to be salt and light to the world. This coming week of discussion will be a challenge for the church to live out this principle. But it is my profound hope that the church may travel together respecting difference to a new place of inclusion that brings joy, respect and dignity to all.

Here in the community of Derby Cathedral I want us to be a place where we are able to hold difference and live with the tension of disagreement where that is necessary. This is what it means to cultivate our saltiness, not to lose the taste, to quote St Matthew.

I envisage Derby Cathedral to be a place where everyone who shares the Christian aspiration to the common good is included no matter what their view is on the current proposals. I have spoken before of the inclusive nature of our community and that continues to be my vision and dream for us all.

And then, finally, being salt, being light together, reinforces our vision to be a Cathedral that is deeply involved with others in the life of our city and our county. Often, we don't notice the way that salt and light help us in daily life, but we certainly notice when there is too much or too little salt around. Too little salt and food runs the risk of being bland and tasteless. Too much salt and our food becomes unhealthy and may even obscure the natural taste. Too little light and we are groping around in the darkness. Too much light and we are dazzled and unable to see. When the levels of salt and light are just right we don't notice how much salt, how much light.

And it's a bit like that for the church in the public realm. Get the level and type of involvement wrong and the part that the church can play in the flourishing of all amongst whom we live and work becomes out of balance and the witness of the church to the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is obscured. To put it another way the church can aspire to be too dominant but it can also not be involved enough.

Today the church cannot claim to be at the centre of the way that the majority of individuals and communities live out their lives. But at Derby Cathedral we aspire to be at the heart of the city, at the heart of the local community, a heart that is occupied by many others, together working towards the common good, working with all others of good will for human flourishing, making a key contribution to the public life of the city and the county. This is why partnership is at the heart of our strategic development plan - because we wish to work with all who prioritise the flourishing of humanity and we wish to offer the distinctive contribution of the church to society and communities of this place. This is to be salt, this is to be light for the earth and for the world.

You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. There is no better way of grasping our calling to be visible as God's church and to take part in God's work for the growth of God's kingdom. Amen.

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Dean of Derby**