

Prayer: Holy Spirit touch my lips, open our hearts and transform our lives. Amen

We've just heard some familiar words of Jesus – you are the salt of the earth – you are the light of the world.

Amazingly 2000 years later, salt and light are still an essential part of our lives and we still can't live without either! They make a difference; they enrich our health and our lives but not just as individuals - salt and light also influence others.

Hopefully as we consider various uses of salt and light now we will grasp something more about what Jesus was really saying.

But first – who was Jesus talking to? Who are salt and light?

Matthew, who wrote this gospel, was one of Jesus' disciples. These verses form part of what we call the "Sermon on the mount". It's a collection of Jesus' teaching primarily given to those who wanted to follow Jesus. Perhaps told as hundreds gathered on the mountain side overlooking the Sea of Galilee to hear this new teacher, prophet, healer but I'm sure Jesus repeated it time and time again to his closer disciples. It's a bit like a manifesto – what does it really mean, in everyday life, to follow Jesus.

If we had started at the beginning of the chapter we might have been surprised by who Jesus said would lead blessed, fulfilled and happy lives. It wasn't the wealthy, those with status or designer clothes or most friends on Facebook... it was those who were poor in spirit, who mourn, are meek, who passionately desire righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and even those persecuted for doing right. It was to such people Jesus said – You are the salt of earth – you are the light of the world. But how can such people who are so often looked down on in society make a difference?

We've seen – and tasted how salt can make a difference – a huge difference. Supporting ... flavouring .. bringing out the best.

One morning last week as I parked my car in our car park I was a bit hesitant about getting out. It was frosty and slippery and if anyone slips and slides it's me! But then I noticed that Sarah had been busy – scattering a mix of salt everywhere – and I knew I would be safe! I got out confidently. Salt protects.

In Jesus time the Roman soldiers received their wages in salt – and that's where we get our word salary from! The Greeks considered salt to be divine. The Old Testament required all the offerings the Jews presented to God contained salt.

Salt was a precious commodity. The fishermen among Jesus' disciples were more than familiar with using salt. Without the fridges and freezers we have today the fish would readily go off in their warm climate. But it was their livelihood and they couldn't rely on a catch every night. So they would rub and wrap the fish in salt and this amazing ingredient would stop the fish from rotting and going off – and could be kept and enjoyed for weeks.

Sometimes I'm shocked when I listen to the news just how much corruption there is in the world including our country. Many seem to be solely out for what they can get for themselves, regardless of others; others seem oblivious to climate change and the long term impact of their actions focussing only on their immediate convenience and pleasure.

Into this situation Jesus said to his would be disciples – you are the salt of the earth. You are to be different and you can make a difference. Salt if it remains distinctive can make a huge difference; but it never draws attention to itself. You may not even notice that it's there but you will soon notice if it's missing!

Who we are and what we do may seem invisible and insignificant but never underestimate the difference we can make. Just being there – perhaps being alongside someone at a difficult time, a time of bereavement or bewilderment or meeting them in their loneliness – will brighten their day; it may even change their lives. Salt can never be effective if it stays in the salt cellar, it has to be poured out. We need to have wisdom to know when to do this quietly and when to speak out.

I wonder what sort of flavour we are bringing to our community and our world? Are we making a difference?

Jesus never said he was the salt of the earth – that's the role of those who follow him but he did say that he was the light of the world!

Whereas salt and its function are mostly invisible – light is just the opposite!! The whole idea of light is to be seen and to enable greater vision.

Light illuminates – shows things up! When we're doing something we don't want anyone else to know about then light can be the last thing we want!

In Jesus' time they were so much more dependent on natural light and restricted as to what they could do and when they could do it. Once the sun went down they light their flickering oil lamps and longed for the first glimpse of daylight. Darkness brought fear and isolation. Bad things happened in the dark.

In contrast light protects. Think about the vital role of a lighthouse. If its light fails there is destruction and even death.

In November while I was away with a friend we went walking on the Yorkshire dales. I was confident we could re-trace our steps – but it's amazing how everything looks so different when you approach it from a different angle. The sun was beginning to set, the darkness was coming in – and we hadn't a clue where we were and were trying desperately not to let each other know how panicked we felt! But suddenly we noticed a light on the horizon coming from a building and cautiously headed in that direction!

The light brought direction. Hope. Very much like the light at the end of a tunnel.

When Jesus said to his followers – you are the light of the world – it wasn't for their own personal enjoyment but primarily for the benefit of others; bringing love, hope, joy to others. You don't, as Jesus said, light a light and then hide it away! You wouldn't dream of covering a lamp with a bowl! That would be pointless – and the light would go out! It needs to be prominent to maximise its effectiveness.

In the same way, said Jesus, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. We need to be visibly doing good, making a difference.

You've probably noticed we're keeping the lights on outside the church – way past Christmas time ... even up to the hour change because we want everyone around to know that it is a place of hope. But lights alone don't achieve much – it has to be demonstrated in our lives – in lives

overflowing with the love of God, with good deeds – and in bringing blessing to others with all that we do.

It's easy to talk about being salt and light when we're sitting in the comfort of a church – but what happens when we leave this building? How can we be effective when we go out into our everyday lives, our homes and places of work?

Isaiah's words of challenge and condemnation came to God's people, who were meant to be bringing light to the world. But instead putting on a show of their religious activities, especially fasting, and wondering why God wasn't answering their prayers. They had become totally focussed on themselves and had forgotten that they were to be God's agents, making a difference in the world. Isaiah calls them to demonstrate the heart of God; to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation, free the oppressed, cancel debts, share food, welcome and clothe the homeless. To make a difference in the lives of others!

God's message is counter cultural. It's not all about us – it's all about Him! Living as Jesus did; dying to self, putting God and others first. Even salt and light aren't the focus; they are there for the benefit of others and may even be destroyed in the process. Are we willing to do this?

E. Blackmore