

“The Spirit and Knowledge of the Lord”

St. Paul’s Presbyterian, Hamilton, 9 February 2014

Psalm 112; Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16

“The salt of the earth.”

It’s a saying. I don’t know that it was a saying when Jesus said it, but it is one now.

When we say, “He (or she) is the salt of the earth”, we mean that he or she is a most worthy person, kind and generous, but also unassuming and benign, just *there* quietly doing good for others and being taken completely for granted.

It’s probably because we assume that since Jesus – gentle Jesus, meek and mild – said it, and said it in a positive context; he must have meant someone good, wholesome and benign.

Yes, a bit of salt added to food quickly dissolves to invisibly but very noticeably make that food taste better. And heavy salting was once the main way of preserving food, along with smoke, back in the days before refrigeration. Think of ham, or salt cod. Not the best thing for blood pressure, but it surely beat food poisoning.

Salt is potent stuff, and it’s that *potency* Jesus was referring to.

But too much of it, of course, can indeed cause high blood pressure and ancillary nasty health problems. So you get to a certain age and you have to watch your consumption of ham.

Salt also stings the cracks I always have in the skin of my hands in the wintertime, and when it unexpectedly hits one of those cracks, I notice, let me tell you. When we had our recent ice storm, I had no ice salt, but I needed its potency to eat into the slippery surface of the ice on my walkways and driveway. Unfortunately everyone else had the same problem and by the time I got to the store to get some they were all sold out of it. I have since stocked up.

So when Jesus called his disciples “the salt of the earth,” he did not mean that they were to be benign and easy to get along with! Why else would he have said, “If salt has *lost its saltiness*, it is no good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot”?

Here we need some context. In ancient Palestine, the easiest place to get salt was from the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is a lake which is below sea level, with no outlet other than by evaporation in the hot desert sun. All the salts in the water are left behind, so it just gets saltier and saltier. The Jordan River has been draining Lake Galilee into it for hundreds of thousands of years at least. It’s much saltier than the ocean, and so dense with salinity that a swimmer floats high in the water. It must be a very weird experience, but a swimmer has to be careful because a mouthful of it will make you very sick indeed and much more than that could kill you.

The salt crystallizes at the water's edge, and you can just gather it there. But there are a lot of impurities in Dead Sea salt, especially gypsum. So the salt – that is, the sodium chloride – leaches out of the “salt” that was gathered, leaving behind the gypsum grit. That residue is the salt that's lost its saltiness, its potency – it's benign, all right, but it's not good for anything either, so you throw it out, dump it out on the ground. It's neutral, but therefore also useless.

That's not what Jesus' disciples are to be in the world – nor, by extension, what his church is to be. No, they are salt, potent salt, that stings the world where it needs to be stung, that shapes its goodness, and preserves it for him who created it, who loves it and whose will is for its life and well-being.

There are always limitations in metaphor, and analogies are always imperfect, which is why Jesus often followed them up with another parallel one, to approach the same truth from a different angle.

“You are the light of the world.” Really?

The current pop atheism says we are the world's *darkness*, that the church, faith in God, religion in general is no mere harmless delusion but the biggest cause of wars and killing.

I don't know where they get this, actually – the history I've read is clear that the 20th century was by far the most deadly in world history and that its wars were caused not by clashes of religion but by clashes of secular empires, nationalisms and political ideologies having very little to do with religion.

For example, the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews was not a horrific religious pogrom motivated by Christian hatred for their rejection of Christ. It was an ethnic genocide motivated by Hitler's German nationalist demagoguery, which blamed the Jews *as a people*, as a “race”, for Germany's and the world's problems. And certainly Stalin, who murdered at least twice as many millions as Hitler and probably more, was no religious man but a Communist ideologue zealous to eliminate “class enemies”.

So we're scarcely the world's darkness, but we're still far from perfect and so “*the light of the world*” would seem more than a bit of a stretch. *Jesus* may be the light of the world – as John says in his gospel, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” – but not us, surely.

But Jesus used the present tense – “*You are* the light of the world.” He ascribes to his disciples – to us – possession of this light, for he has imparted it to us. He doesn't say, “If you do thus and so, you *will be* the light of the world”, but simply, “*You are* the light of the world!” It's not an ethical exhortation, but a statement of fact.

So we cling, in faith and trust, not only to God's promise to reconcile us to himself in Christ but to Jesus' own assurance that the reconciled existence he lives by the Holy Spirit is also our own possession *now*.

Maybe it *is* only in the bud just yet, and not in full flower – but does the bud not already have hidden, folded up, within itself everything the full bloom will ever be? As the Spirit draws us near to God, we see others with the eyes of the One who is their Creator, and our own. We see them with the eyes of Jesus, whose life is the light of all people, who looking upon them – and us – gave up that life for us all that we might live in the light.

Our lives are taken up by the Spirit into the life of Jesus, and we live his self-giving love for others reflecting his Father's love for all of us. We are, with him and through him, the light of the world. This is what God *has done*.

We are not the light of the world *in and of ourselves* – apart from the Spirit leading us to the living divine reality of Jesus Christ, we exist in deepest darkness! But as Jesus himself is really in us by the Holy Spirit, and our life together thus becomes testimony of the love of God for his people, we *are*, indeed, the light of the world. So our lamp is lit.

Are we a city on a hill?

Today the historic stone spire of St. Paul's doesn't dominate the Hamilton skyline as it once did, but is partly obscured by newer and taller buildings. Nor do the Church and Christianity today dominate the wider culture as they once did. For better or for worse, and I'm not always sure which it is, things are different than they were in decades past. But they are what they are, and the fact is, this world has never stayed the same.

What never changes is God's love for it, and God's will to draw it near to live in the light. But have we, by not keeping pace with the world's change, tied the eternal truth of the Gospel to cultural values and practices of an earlier, bygone time?

Have we inadvertently become a cultural backwater, the Presbyterian equivalent of, say, old-order Mennonites in their horse-drawn buggies, and thus popped a bushel basket over the light of Christ in us? If so, how can we uncap it, so God's beloved can see it again?

How can we show the world and its people how much they matter to God, and how much God loves them? That is something which your leadership here at St. Paul's, your Session, is struggling with, praying about and taking action to find some answers to.

We have some initiatives in the coming months that we hope will begin to address some of these questions and point us in the right directions.

But the thing for all of us to remember in this is, in Christ we *are* the salt of the earth. We *are* the light of the world. This is something we *already have*, by Jesus' own assurance and the Spirit's power. So let us find a way to get the bushel basket off of the light of Christ, our light, so that he may shine out clear and bright from this "city on a hill" of a congregation.

He's really just calling us to really *be* what he has already made us. Amen.