

Salt

6 2 11

Almighty God,
by whose grace alone we are accepted
and called to your service;
strengthen us by your Holy Spirit
and make us worthy of our calling.

My text today is Matthew chapter 5 and verse 13: 'You are the salt of the earth but if salt should lose its flavour, how can its saltiness be restored ? It is no longer good for anything but it is thrown out and trampled under foot.'

If you heard, if you overheard someone talking about you and you heard them say that you are 'the salt of the earth', would you be pleased ? The answer should be yes because the phrase, 'the salt of the earth' is one of the great phrases of approbation that appear in the Bible rather like my personal favourite, also from Matthew's gospel, 'Well done good and faithful servants' (25 v23). Okay, so being called 'the salt of the earth' is good but what exactly does it mean ?

According to 'Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable', 'salt of the earth' means 'the best of mankind', 'perfect' people. Praise indeed: though perhaps our natural modesty would make us uneasy about accepting such praise. But I am still curious to know why salt should be used by Jesus to suggest the virtue which should typify his disciples in particular and us as Christians in general ?

In the text, the Greek word Matthew uses for salt is ἅλας ('halas') but our English word 'salt' and the French word 'sel' have a different root which they share with the Latin word embodied in our word 'salary' itself denoting the money with which a Roman soldier was paid to buy his salt !

Fine. But I'm still curious to understand why Jesus should describe us as the salt of the earth if by which he was suggesting we are intended to be best of people. I think the answer is threefold and can be seen in the virtues or properties of salt.

Firstly, salt gives flavour to food. That much is obvious if you have ever eaten food coked without salt. Sad-to-say salt is one of the things modern medicine tells us we should only use in moderation because too much salt will ultimately poison our bodies leading to two common causes of death: a stroke or heart attack. But as any cook knows, you do need some salt to make food tasty !

Secondly, salt preserves food. Before the invention of refrigerators and deep freezers, salt was an effective way of prolonging the shelf-life of food, its sell-by date. One such example might be salt beef.

Thirdly, salt is curative. If you suffer from a sore throat or mouth ulcers to gargle with salt will reduce the inflammation. Apparently in the days of corporal punishment, if someone was whipped, salt might be rubbed into the wounds which, though understandably painful, would help the healing by reducing the risk of infection.

So we can see why Jesus should use it as a term to describe his followers: we should be 'fit for purpose' in order to bring flavour to the lives of others; to preserve what is good in life; to provide a cure for what's wrong in life.

Sounds good but before I stop, there is a sting in Jesus' teaching. As the salt of the earth, we are meant to be fit for purpose. But what if we're not? What if we lose our saltiness; the virtue of being good Christian folk? Our pew Bibles have the phrase 'no longer good for anything'; the King James has 'good for nothing'. If we are truly good for nothing, then our fate will be equally graphic. Salt that has lost its flavour is thrown out and scattered on the floor it will be trampled underfoot – OUCH !

I leave you with this thought then. Christians are the salt of the earth: the sort of people who make life worth living by what we do and by what we say. But if we fail to live up to our vocation, there is the awful risk of being ejected as being unfit for purpose !

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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H: Sermon 23: Salt

