

**The Church's Message for the World as Response – Involved  
Isaiah 42:1-7 / Matt 5:13-16**

**(David Crawley, 25.10.09)**

Our text this morning presents us with two familiar metaphors: salt and light.

But before we think more about that, I want to acknowledge that we have some folk here with us this morning who are living it out. On a regular basis, each one of these people is going into places that most of us will never go. In terms of involvement in the world, of being salt and light, these people are on the front line. Who are they? Look around and you'll see them. In fact, you are one of them – one of those who several times a week go – and in going take Christ – into workplaces, universities, hospitals, court rooms, schools, childcare centres, shops, corporate offices, government agencies, counselling rooms, building sites, community groups, sports clubs, and many other places.

One of my favourite saints, Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> C Carmelite nun, wrote this:

*"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world.  
Yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good;  
Yours are the hands by which he is to bless others now."*

So I'm not here as being to tell you all that you *should* be involved in the world. As a member of society, you *are* involved. Jesus says: "You *are* the salt of the earth ... you *are* the light of the world ...".

These are not imperatives, they are *identity statements*. This is who and what we are as Christ followers.

There is a *challenge* in Jesus' words, however. Salt can lose its flavour, light can be hidden. And if we extend the metaphors a little, not only can salt and light be ineffective, they can be downright unpleasant.

The research that Iain has been referring to, from the book *Unchristian*, reports that Christians are often perceived as people who rub salt into others wounds, and shine the harsh spotlight of judgment on their lives.

It's sad, and perhaps confusing, to hear that while we are doing our best to be good Christians, many people are not seeing Christ. We think we are producing spiritual fruit, but instead people see religious nuts!

The confusion reminds me of one of my favourite scenes in "The Vicar of Dibley" in which the rather dim-witted verger Alice is talking to Geraldine the vicar about butter...

*"You know that stuff that they're selling now at the local shop ... "I Can't Believe it's Not Butter"? ...  
Well, you know, I can't believe it's not butter ...*

*Then yesterday, I went to Crookendon and I bought this other stuff, like a sort of home brand ... and you know, I can't believe it's not "I Can't Believe it's Not Butter" ... Yeah ... I can't believe the stuff that is not "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" is not "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter".*

*And I can't believe that both "I Can't Believe It's not Butter" and the stuff that I can't believe is not "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" are both in fact not butter. And I believe they both might be butter... In a cunning disguise. And in fact, there's a lot more butter around than we all thought there was."*

So, I can imagine some people in Christendom responding to the 'unchristian' research with similar confusion:

*"You know the stuff they talk about in that book 'Unchristian' – judging sin, opposing the gays, trying to get people converted, separating ourselves from the world, and all that?  
Well ... I can't believe it's not Jesus!"*

It's scary to think that in trying hard to be Jesus, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we might sometimes be getting the flavour wrong. But it's not a new problem.

Time and again in the Gospels, people with a deep concern for holiness challenged Jesus about the fact that he mixed with sinners, prostitutes, tax-collectors and people who were unclean. These critics were well intentioned. They were trying to be salt and light in their own way. But, they had the flavour of God's purposes wrong. They seemed to be more *afraid* of being contaminated by unholiness than *confident* that their involvement might actually bless a broken world with God's redeeming love. Maybe we can be like that too?

In Matthew chapter 12 we read about a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, as to whether it was lawful for him to heal a man with a crippled hand on the Sabbath. It is one of those times when we see Jesus deeply moved, angry and indignant at their misuse of the *Torah*:

"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! Therefore *of course* it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored.

How deeply the Pharisees had missed the point of the Sabbath principle. It was a principle intended to *bless*, to bring *shalom*, to restore wholeness and life to human beings. But they had made it into something that was oppressive, something separatist – they wielded the law as an instrument of exclusion and judgment.

Immediately after relating this incident, Matthew refers his readers back to the opening verses of Isaiah 42. If you read Isaiah 42 in its entirety, you will see that it talks about the servant that God intended Israel to be – his messenger, his light to the world, his key to fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him and his descendants.

But Israel had become a blind and deaf servant – seeing and hearing only what they wanted to see and hear from God – like this device for men! God's people too easily forgot that they were blessed in order to *be a blessing*. They were called to be a light to the Gentiles, but they saw themselves as better than the rest, blessed for their own sake. They deeply believed that they were serving God, but the prophets had to tell them that they had gotten the *flavour* of their servanthood wrong.

In words that ultimately point forward to Jesus, God speaks through Isaiah of his true servant:

"*Here* is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring *justice* to the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice ..."

The flavour, the heartbeat of the Servant's work in the world, will not be what God's people might have expected. He will not create a spectacle, he will not shout his mouth off in the street, and he will not ride roughshod over those who are broken, bruised and struggling. He will come with a message of hope.

We know how this profile of the Servant continues to unfold in the Book of Isaiah and into the New Testament – the true Servant of the Lord will bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning – and all of this at the cost of his own life: he will be "pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities."

He is the one who comes not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. As Jesus takes up this calling in the New Testament, he recruits others to join him, including us: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Bring good news to the poor, uphold true shalom-bringing justice, be the kind of light that reaches people in darkness to offer them hope, set captives free – if the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed. Bless people with grace, and the healing love of God which welcomes prodigals and sits at table with society's rejects. Befriend outsiders without fear of contamination.

And *where* we will we do this? Some of it will be here, in the context of the church and its ministries – the “city on a hill” suggests a community, a corporate effort to be the light of the world. “God focused, people oriented.”

Much of the time it will be out there, the sprinkling of the salt out from the safe salt-cellar of the church. In the frontline engagements that you have this week and every week in your involvements in the world – in workplaces, on campuses, in homes, on community boards, in building friendships, and so on. To be salt and light is to take every opportunity to be Christ – to bless others with the blessing we have received, to infuse our contexts with God’s grace, compassion, justice and life-giving hope.

There was a wonderful example recently on TVNZ’s *Close Up*, featuring policemen who bring their faith into the frontline of their work: “Cops who bring criminals to their knees.” Check it out on the TVNZ website.

Finally, then, some brief take-home suggestions:

- Let’s abandon attempts to prove that we’re the ones on the “right” side of some line of acceptability to God, over and against others who are “outside” the line (Luke 7; Luke 18). The truth is, *we are all on the same side of the line*, i.e. the wrong side! Our only claim is that God’s grace has found and embraced us there. Take the risk of getting to know some of the so-called “outsiders” and, when appropriate, sharing with them your story of grace.
- *Embrace “life”* – life with a fullness and a deep joy that others find will find intriguing and attractive. World-denying and this-life-devaluing attitudes are a turnoff. I suspect that many of those who came to Jesus and followed him had only a patchy understanding of what he was saying, but the way he spoke, the way he lived, the “flavour” of his freedom and grace and life-giving authority, *attracted* them – it had them wanting more. “They will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”, Jesus says.
- *Live authentically* – be an open book of ups and downs, victories and setbacks, in which people get to see grace at work. Again we have seen examples of this on TV in the loss of little Aisling Symes, and last year the Elim School drowning tragedy. As Leonard Cohen puts it in his song “Anthem”:  
*Ring the bells that still can ring.  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack in everything.  
That's how the light gets in.*
- In your sphere of involvement, grapple with what it means for *your story to be part of God’s “big story”* – God’s dream of blessing, redeeming and renewing creation. See also [www.faithatwork.org.nz](http://www.faithatwork.org.nz). Get together with others in your line of work to talk and pray about what it means to be Christians in your field.
- *Look for examples/mentors* – present or past – people whose engagement with the world, as people of faith, inspires you. Study their lives, spend time with them if possible, learn from them. For me, as a young Christian who aspired to be an academic, C. S. Lewis was an early inspiration.
- In home groups, *support one another and pray for one another* in your various involvements in the world. Perhaps take on a project together as a home group that will bless your community in some way.
- Above all, let’s *remain deeply connected to Jesus – as individuals and as a church*. The more time we spend with him, the more we abide in him, in his love and his truth, the more our lives will naturally be infused with *his* grace and ‘flavour’. Remember Stan’s messages on “Being in Love” - who could forget?!

Finally ... what’s *our* flavour as a community of God’s people, here at St George’s?

Wouldn’t it be marvellous if others’ experience of St George’s people had them saying:

*“I met someone from that church in Ranfurly Rd – and, you know, I can’t believe it wasn’t Jesus! In fact, I believe it might have been Jesus. There’s a lot more Jesus around than we all thought there was!”*