

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Epiphany 5A*

*Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> February 2020*

*Be what you are*

You are the salt of the earth. You are light of the world.

Jesus says these words to his followers right after he's called all sorts of people and his disciples blessed.

What does it mean to be salt of the earth and light of the world?

Let's think about salt and light.

What do we know about salt? Gives flavour, preserves food and purifies. It spreads out in the food it flavours.

Light? It reveals the room, makes it possible to see, scatters darkness, even from just a small light. The lamp in ancient times was a small clay pot.

We often take light for granted and often don't notice how dark is darkness unless you're in the bush.

Jesus says this is what you *are* – salt of the earth, light of the world.

Notice he doesn't say you should be light or you have to be. You already are... and this is both now and continues on in the future.

The nature of salt is to be salty, the nature of light is to shine.

So be what and who you are.

(I wonder how you have been salt and light over the last two weeks?) It's already happening.

Notice that this call is not just for us as individuals. The 'you' in the Greek is plural – in Australian 'yous' all are the salt of the earth, light of the world.

It is a call to all of us together, as a community.

We are challenged to serve as light and salt together for the sake of the world around us.

We are living witnesses to the gospels.

We are to be zest for the whole world.

This is a big ask. How on earth do we do this?

I think it is not about focussing on us and looking inwards.

We are salt of the earth. It is for the earth, of the world not being light just for the room of this church. Salt enhances flavour by spreading itself out. We are not to be a closed group clumped together.

We are not there to be dominating: there is such a thing as too much salt. I made a custard once mistaking the salt container for sugar and it was awful.

Neither are we to become so bland that we become nothing at all.

We can become too close to society and its values, we can adapt and become comfortable. It is so easy to do, to get caught up in ambition and wealth and success and consuming things. It is easy to let integrity slip because its easier and to get caught up in fear.

The church can do this and has done it when it gets caught up in protecting itself as an institution rather than those who have suffered abuse.

It is tempting to hide from the challenges of the world because it all looks too much.

Yet as Jesus says: a light is not to be hidden under a basket.

You are salt of the earth, light of the world.

Our lives and our calling has significance to the world around us. Mission, living as God's good news is part of who we are, just like saltiness is to salt, and shining is to light.

If we are honest we aspire to this, but most of us don't do it all that well. I want to do it, yet at times my courage fails me, or I don't say what needs to be said, or get scared.

Yet Jesus is saying to his motley lot be who and what you already are. God's light and God's wisdom shines through us.

This is not something we do on our own. Our saltiness and light come from God and are God's gift. This season of Epiphany reminds us that God's light has come into the world through Jesus becoming flesh and that we in our human flesh can also reflect God's light, in our ordinary lives.

To be who we are is to start with prayer and worship to draw on God's transforming love and strength to be who we are.

What does it mean to be visible and let our light shine?

As Christians God's light shines within us. Our calling isn't about institutional survival but about something deeper and greater. Who we are and what we do in the world counts.

As Christians we can enhance others.

As Madeleine L'Engle says: *'we do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe by telling them how wrong*

*they are and how right we are but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it'.*

I think the reading from Isaiah has pointers: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free...to share your food with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house. When we do this your light shall break forth.

As Henri Nouwen says:

*We no longer have to ask ourselves if we are approaching a state of emergency. We are in the midst of it, right here and now, and we expect the future to mirror the past....*

*It is in the midst of this dark world that we are invited to live and radiate hope. Is it possible?*

*Can we become light, salt, and leaven to our brothers and sisters in the human family?*

*Can we offer hope, courage, and confidence to the people of this era? Do we dare break through our paralysing fear?*

*Will people be able to say of us, 'See how they love each other, how they serve their neighbour, and how they pray to their Lord?'*

*Or do we have to confess that at this juncture of history we just do not have the needed strength or the generosity?*

*How can we live in hope so as to give hope? And how do we find true joy?*

*-Henri Nouwen 1932-1996  
Clowning in Rome*

It is possible to add flavour, to add zest wherever you are.

I wonder what it looks like to you – to be a truth teller/ to give hope?

People recognize it when they see it.

Look at Bernie Shakeshaft, the Local hero at the Australian of the year awards who saw the plight of disadvantaged youth and has worked tirelessly with them to help turn their lives around. His work meant so much that young people in prison had heard about it and nominated him for the award.

So be what you are.

You are salt of the earth.

You are light of the world.

*Lections:*

*Isaiah 58.1-9*

*Psalm 112*

*1 Corinthians 2.1-13*

*Matthew 5.13-20*