

Sometimes, Jesus says things that sound false. Obviously, they're true, because Jesus says, them; but when we pause to think about what He's said, we wonder, "Is that REALLY true?" Take today's gospel reading.

Jesus has just started His famous Sermon on the Mount and completed His list of "Beatitudes" – those statements: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are the meek." Those are strange in themselves, but then Jesus, says:

"You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world."

I not sure about you, but I'm not sure I always feel like I'm salt and light. But Jesus said, "You are..." And I love that what Jesus says is true, even if I don't feel like it. My feelings don't change what Jesus has declared: I am the salt of the earth; I am the light of the world. Well, yes, and no.

Thankfully, as is often the case Jesus isn't talking about me. The "you" is plural. Jesus is saying to those who will hear His message and obey it, "You all" are the salt of the earth, "you all" are the light world. This is not something I am on my own, nor is it something I can do on my own. We need each other; together, we are salt and light.

In another place, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world."<sup>1</sup> But there is a chasm of difference between Jesus being the light of the world and us being the light of the world. When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" He was making the grand claim that He is the exclusive source of spiritual light that will lead people to God.<sup>2</sup> There are other lights in the world; before Jesus was born, the Roman philosopher Cicero described Rome's identity and mission as "light to the whole world."<sup>3</sup> Even today there are other lights, there are other sources of spiritual guidance, but only Jesus is the trustworthy guide to the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus calls us "the light of the world" He is not saying that we are like Him in a maximalist sense. We are not the same as Jesus. The light we shine – ought to be – merely a reflection of His light.

To use an astronomical illustration, Jesus is the Sun, we are the Moon. The full Moon may well shine brightly on a cloudless night, but the Moon's light is not its own – the Moon's light is merely a reflection of the Sun. We are the light of the world only when we reflect the light of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:12

<sup>2</sup> Got Questions Ministries, Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2002–2013)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-513-20-6>

But what did Jesus *mean* when He called His followers salt and light?

The two common features people usually associate with salt is that of preservation and flavouring, and this is certainly part of what Jesus was implying.

However, sometimes we might think of the church solely in terms of preservation: that by being salt the church is meant to slow the spiritual and moral decay in the world. The church does this by living out the values of the Kingdom of God – love, joy, truth, justice, peace, mercy.

But the problem is, when you only think of salt as a preserver, there is a risk that you will think of the world only in negative terms. But salt also enhances flavour, by enhancing what is already there. This suggests that the church is meant to bring out the goodness and beauty that we see in life, in relationships, and in culture.

Yes, there are things in the world that are bad, but equally there are many things that are beautiful, and wonderful, and need to be celebrated, and enhanced. The church should be at the front of the line celebrating the good we see in the world.

But you have to be careful with salt. Too much and everything becomes salty, which can overwhelm the flavours already there. Balance matters. This may imply that the church is not meant to dominate or overpower the world, but rather merely to influence the positive things there.

This might also be implied by the fact that salt is powerful. A tiny amount can have a disproportionate effect on flavour.

Think about the way Jesus described the Kingdom of God in His parables. In Matthew 13 the Kingdom is a tiny seed that grows, or yeast that leavens a whole batch of dough. The Kingdom might start small, but it grows.

Preservation and flavouring are the two main features of salt we think about, but salt does more than this. In the ancient world salt was used as an antiseptic. Its application would sting, but it would heal. Its use had to be carefully monitored – too much salt would be a bad thing. Sometimes what is good for us hurts, but we have to be careful with its application.

There is one feature of ice Jesus' followers probably would not have known about. Salt can melt ice. There's some science behind this, but simply salty water freezes at colder temperatures than fresh water. Fresh water freezes at 0° C; sea water freezes at around -2° C.

In many countries they put salt onto roads to melt the ice; the freshwater ice on the road's freezes at 0° C, but by adding salt to the ice (and it getting mixed in by vehicles driving over it), the ice slush becomes salty and melts.

Salt melts ice by changing the conditions so that the ice can no longer stay frozen – it breaks ice's rules. The church – we – are meant to change the conditions of the world, not by force, but by presence. Coldness (hardness, cruelty, or indifference) cannot stay the same when salt is present.

Salt makes something that is seemingly impossible, possible. Ice should not melt at 0° C, but salt makes it melt anyway.

When the church loves people, when it speaks out and acts for truth, justice, peace, mercy, it can change circumstances that seem frozen and locked in place.

But there are two features of salt that apply in all situations, whether preserving, flavouring, healing, or melting.

Firstly, salt needs to be close to something... in fact it needs to be touching. Proximity matters. Salt doesn't do anything from a distance.

Secondly, salt needs to be dissolved to work. Salt participates in the process of change.

These things point us toward the costliness of being salt. Because if the church is meant to preserve and flavour, and heal, and melt, it will only do so by being part of society, by being mixed into it, by being in relationship with people, and by being willing to be dissolved. The work of salt is quiet and unassuming. Salt doesn't change anything by shouting at it.

In December a large group of members from Destiny Church performed a haka in the streets of Manurewa stopping a Sikh parade. Video shows members of Destiny standing face to face with Sikh members, in a confronting, aggressive manner, loudly performing their haka.

Brian Tamaki then went on social media supporting church members and the haka.<sup>4</sup>

While I disagree with the beliefs of the Sikh faith, I do wonder if this is what Jesus meant when He called the church to be salt and light. How does a protest build relationships? How does it influence change? It doesn't.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://x.com/BrianTamakiNZ/status/2002199437691765003>

Salt works quietly, humbly. In right measure it enhances flavour, it preserves, and it heals. Too much of it however becomes overwhelming, even toxic.

Which suggests we need to be careful; we need to remember that we are not only salt, but light – and the light we reflect is not our own, it is the glorious, beautiful, holy, loving light of Christ, shining most brightly when Christ hung on the Cross to forgive our sin and reconcile us to God.

Being salt means being willing to serve, to give ourselves away – to be dissolved – so that the world might be changed. It means being willing to experience discomfort, sacrifice and loss, because salt does not stay untouched; it is absorbed and participates in the process of change. But for salt to work it had to stay salty.

Technically, salt cannot lose its saltiness, but in the ancient world it could, by becoming mixed with impurities. Overtime, what looked like salt, wasn't salt at all, and it would become useless for seasoning or preserving, and then be thrown out and “trampled underfoot.”

Salt doesn't lose saltiness by being used, it loses it by becoming diluted or compromised. The warning for the church is that we lose our saltiness when we become indistinguishable from the world.

The church is salt and light. These two things work very differently.

Light can do its work from a distance; it can work without direct contact. We need light, because we need to see the way forward; we need to see. But light does not change anything, apart from dispelling darkness.

Salt, however, transforms everything it touches, by being present and up close. Unlike light, it only works in relationship to its surroundings, and unlike light, salt is unseen when it does work; it is absorbed, dissolved, and sacrifices itself as it works. Light works from the outside; salt works from the inside.

We need to be both. We need to shine the light of Christ, shining like a beacon of hope and guidance, but we also need to be willing to live in the world, up close and personal, so that we can affect change.

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