

Matthew 5.13-20

You Are Salt!

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1962 my father took a photograph of me. I was 4 months old and wearing a dress which barely covered an enormous terry towelling nappy, out of which stretched a pair of unfeasibly long and skinny legs, with matching feet and toes. My mother began to worry. By the time I was three my mother was sufficiently concerned to measure me, knowing that if she doubled my height she would find out just how tall I would finally be. I measured 3'1". By the time I was in my teens I had figured out how to lose 4" in height by imitating the shape of a corkscrew. My mother decided to address the problem head on.

"Claire – you're tall. That's just how it is. Trying to appear shorter just makes you look ridiculous and it doesn't work. You're tall."

There's nothing like a bit of straight talking to get a point across. And there's nothing more ridiculous than someone trying to be what they are not. Mother was (as always) right. It was in my genes. I was destined to be tall. No amount of bizarre contortions would ever convince an onlooker that I was of average height.

Most of us have some part of our appearance which we attempt to camouflage. As we grow up we learn to create our own smoke screen, to paint on a particular face, or change our accent, we do a little glossing over and we hide behind the disguise we have created.

For many of us it's not what we look like but the sort of person we think we are which we try to hide. Fundamentally, most of us feel that the best we can do is to hide the truth and hope that no-one notices. Now and again the mask slips and truth emerges. But we pop the mask back on and carry on regardless.

It's amazing just how much time and energy we can give to maintaining the façade. Whole industries rely on the revenue which we spend - on fashion, cosmetics, plastic surgery. Not that any of those industries are in themselves unhealthy, but like all good things taken to excess, things can get out of hand before we've even noticed that there's a problem.

That's when we need a bit of straight-talking.

Jesus said, "You are salt."

You. Are. Salt.

Not 'You could be' or 'You should be' salt. Not 'If you try harder you could one day be salt'. Not 'You should appear to be like salt'. No. Just. You. Are. Salt.

Well there's the straight-talking but what on earth does it mean? And more to the point what did it mean to Jesus?

Well in biblical terms salt was certainly more than half a cruet set on the dining room table. Salt was not only a spice which brought the flavour of food to life; salt was a preservative, an astringent and an antiseptic. Salt cleansed and cured. Salt was both a life saver and the flavoursome savour of life.

Every offering in the Temple was first sprinkled with salt to make it acceptable to God. In Numbers and the 2nd book of the Chronicles salt was the preservative used to remind the people of the everlasting covenant which God made with his people.

So what did Jesus mean when he said that his disciples were salt?

Well, if we're salt then we make all the difference to the taste around us. Where life is bland we enhance. We bring out the flavours God placed in the world. We spice up the world around us. We are zest.

We are fine as dust or coarse as sea salt. We can polish like fine sand or be the true grit which keeps the foot from slipping.

We are a preservative. We know of the life that has no end. We extend life. We save lives too. We are an astringent and a cleanser. We are the seal to his covenant, and when we are sprinkled over an offering we make it acceptable to God himself. We transform the ordinary into the holy, the offerings of the people into a pleasing odour, we are rich in symbolism and possibility.

We are salt. We are amazing!

Except we don't really believe that do we?

Yes of course we've have heard it said that we were knitted together in our mother's womb, that we've been made in the image and likeness of God. But we'd still prefer it if we could make some small but significant tweaks to God's design couldn't we?

But just for a moment. Listen carefully. Yes, I'm talking to you.

Before you were even conceived you were known. Before any act of love on earth created you, you were already loved by God. You were only conceived on earth because you had already been conceived by your Creator. God could do no other than conceive of you because there has never been a time when he did not love or long for you. It was God's loving and longing for you which designed every cell and fibre of your being.

Because there was no accident when you were created. The essence of who you were called to be was first and foremost imagined into existence by God.

You are a deliberate and immaculately designed act of creation. Because you, in your absolute uniqueness, have been made in the image and likeness of the God who longs for you still. You are amazing.

But in his generosity God first creates us and then leaves us with a choice. We can decide to acknowledge and become the beautiful and unique human being he created us to be or instead we can choose to live as the pale imitation which we've designed for ourselves.

We can know ourselves to be capable of changing the world around us just by being who we were intended to be.

Or we can make no difference whatsoever. We can decide to be someone we're not.

And what use would that be asks Jesus? What use would salt be, asks Jesus, if it lost its flavour?

That's a really interesting question because in fact salt cannot ever lose its flavour. It always tastes salty. Even old salt still remains salty. There's nothing we can ever do which might make salt un-salty.

Yet Jesus spoke of salt which had lost its flavour being useless, fit for nothing except to be trodden under foot.

If you've ever had cause to taste the salt we use to scatter on an icy road or to make a pathway less slippery you'll know that such salt does still taste salty. So which salt was Jesus talking about when he spoke of the salt which had lost its flavour?

Perhaps Jesus was talking about the salt which was used in the Temple for sacrifice. Such salt could become desecrated by contact with things which might contaminate. Then it would no longer be holy. It could no longer have a sacred purpose and it would be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Such salt was desecrated because it could no longer be true to itself, to its purpose, which was to sanctify, to transform the ordinary, into the holy.

But all other salt is always salt. It always tastes salty. It may never get out of the salt cellar so as to behave as salt. That bit is up to us. To be salt. Or not. It's entirely up to us.

To live fully alive as God intended.

Or to remain less than that, a pale shadow of God's creation.

We can transform the world.

Or we can desecrate our sacred purpose and become what we are not.

Who are you? Who has God called into existence when he created you? What is the very essence of your being? It may not have even seen the light of day yet. Perhaps you know deep within yourself that it's the you which you've always tried to hide. Perhaps letting that truth be shown in the world may be the most frightening thing you've ever done. But if you don't ever become that extraordinary and unique human being God always created you to be, then the world will be less beautiful than it might have been. And we shall all be the less as a result.

Jesus said, "You are salt."

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