

Salt and Light.

New Worshipping Communities

Based on an address to St Editha's Tamworth – 3rd April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot

Matthew 5.13-16

Matthew brings together in this passage the images of salt and light. In Luke's gospel, these occur in different places, but Matthew presents Jesus as deliberately making a pair of contrasted and complementary signs to show what the presence of Christian disciples can mean for others.

Both light and salt are Jewish symbols of God's people: Israel was meant to be a 'light to the nations', while salt as a preservative pointed to the survival of a faithful remnant among the people. In Matthew's gospels, these two signs are applied to the life of Christian disciples – this gospel passage follows on immediately from the 'Beatitudes', in which Jesus described the distinctive qualities of Christians.

On the one hand, salt works within another substance in a hidden way; when it is used for cooking or preservation, it permeates and flavours the whole, but does not draw attention to itself. When it is added to water, it gives up its own identity as it is dissolved in the liquid, yet it has a transformative impact in a hidden way. On the other hand, light stands out, and distinguishes itself from darkness; it precisely does draw attention to itself, as a visible sign in a dark world which attracts people through its own brightness.

Both salt and light have their own dangers – in themselves, but also when separated from one another as images of Christian discipleship; they belong together, and we need to refer to both to understand what it means to be a Christian community.

So, salt can lose its flavour through becoming so dispersed as to be tasteless: as Jesus says (Mt 5.13), if its saltiness has gone 'it is no longer good for anything'. This is a loss of Christian distinctiveness – we can see it happen when community groups or projects which were originally established to show Christian love and care gradually drift away from the life of the church, and become indistinguishable from secular organisations. Examples of this include many of the Housing Associations which began as church-based providers – or professional football teams which began as Sunday School sides.

By contrast, light can become so obsessed with shining as brightly as possible that it ends up dazzling those around and pointing to itself rather than to the Father in heaven: 'Look at me! look at me! Look at me!', it says. This way lies the cult of the leader or of the club, which has forgotten that Jesus specifies that the whole purpose of 'shining before others' (Mt 5.16) is in order to glorify God, not ourselves.

Existing churches vary greatly from one another, and some may be more at the 'light' end of the spectrum, others more 'salt'. An impressive architectural pile standing at the very centre of a town may catch people's attention like the light; an undemonstrative hut around the corner may be focused on dispersing Christian influence through society like salt. As we look to establish new worshipping communities too, we need both 'light' and 'salt', both the gathered and the dispersed; we need communities that are both attention-seeking and behaviourshaping.

What new Christian presence does our community need? How do light and salt belong together?

+Michael Lichfield

