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“You are the salt of the world, but if salt has lost its taste, how can it be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot”

Over the thirty or so years I have taught in a seminary in England, one of the things I have always enjoyed is listening to the students preaching their practice sermons – our final year students have to preach twice to their peers and to a member of staff, and then they receive something called ‘feedback’ (which is shorthand for constructive criticism). I think they find it completely terrifying, far worse than preaching in any placement church. But I enjoy listening to see how students put things across and explain bits of the Bible, occasionally even in new and refreshing ways. One thing they are taught is to capture people’s attention at the beginning, so that people pay attention right through the sermon – there you are, I have now caught your attention.

In truth, however, I seldom think very consciously about the beginning of my sermons. I sometimes start with a bit of obscure historical detail but usually I plunge straight in. I suppose I could have tried something else and I could perhaps have brought a prop with me, like some cooking salt. I could have started passing it around so you can taste its saltiness. But you will be pleased to know I won’t be doing that.

But it did get me thinking about salt. And to be honest, salt isn’t something I had ever thought much about. It’s such an ordinary thing – all I know about salt is that it’s sodium chloride and has been used through history as a preservative, a flavour enhancer, and a disinfectant. It was also incredibly valuable – salt roads carried the precious commodity across the Roman Empire, and soldiers’ pay was measured in terms of the amount of salt it could buy – hence our word ‘salary’. Or think of the phrase, ‘she’s really worth her salt’.

I had certainly never thought much about the passage we had as the Gospel reading, probably because it sounds really rather simple – Jesus seems to be saying we need to be a kind of flavour enhancer among those we are living and working with; and if we backslide and lose our saltiness then our religion becomes completely sterile. So I could pass the salt around, we can lick our fingers, and move on to the rest of the service.

But when you think about it that doesn’t really work – salt cannot lose its taste. Sodium chloride is always sodium chloride and cannot ever lose its saltiness. In fact, I have some very old cooking salt in my cupboard and it still tastes of salt – and it doesn’t even have a sell-by date.

So what did Jesus mean by the little passage? It comes immediately after the beatitudes, those passages about the different groups who are blessed – like the pure in heart; and straight after the passage, as we heard, Jesus spends a lot of time trying to explain the true meaning of the law. Soon afterwards there are lots of the passages where he says – you have heard it said, but I say to you. Most of the commentators have used this location in the Gospel to try to explain what is going on, which is something like this: the law has lost its real flavour, which Jesus restores, and then the disciples are charged with sharing this message with those around them.

That's all very well, and no doubt a good message, but I don't think it really fits with the passage.

So what might help us explain what Jesus meant? First of all, let's think about where Jesus was teaching – at this stage in his ministry he's up by the Sea of Galilee which is where the water gathers from the mountains, and which then flows into the River Jordan. It's an interesting Sea or Lake because it's actually below sea level and the river Jordan then flows down even lower along the great rift valley into the Dead Sea which is the lowest place on earth. Of course, most rivers flow into the ocean, but the Jordan doesn't. It goes down and down and leaves its deposits in a Sea that is so rich in minerals that it supports no life; hence the name. Some people might possibly have bathed in the sea which is very strange – you float and afterwards you can't wash off the minerals. I did it once and never again.

Today Dead Sea minerals are big business – and not surprisingly rights to harvest the minerals are politically charged in the volatile region. And in Jesus' time, too, the minerals were also very valuable, and many of them were used as fertilisers – so perhaps Jesus is speaking not of salt as we know it, but of potash, of other forms of salt, which are neither preservatives nor flavour enhancers, but fertilisers.

Now, I have never really understood much about fertilisers – I am the sort of gardener who digs in a bit of compost to help along my crops but I have never bought fertilisers to make sure the soil will produce a crop in abundance. But I watch the huge tractors driving past my house regularly to treat the fields around us with fertiliser. It's big business and it certainly works: the crops come in abundance every year, come rain or shine.

And fertilizer has been valuable for a very long time – my father once worked for a bank founded by a man called William Gibbs who made his money from South American guano, a form of fertilizer; and he went on to pay for churches across England as well as Keble College Chapel. He became the richest non-noble in England (and his son became Lord Aldenham). Rather wisely, the first principal of my college married into the family. Extracting minerals from bird droppings helped feed a rapidly expanding population in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Apparently 211,000 tons were imported via the ports of Bristol and London in 1856.

So what is it that a fertiliser does? It's much more powerful than a flavour enhancer or a preservative – instead, it's an accelerator. It makes things happen faster as it permeates through the

soil. But as it spreads throughout the soil, it breaks down and it loses its saltiness. Which means that if we put fertiliser that has lost its active ingredients into the soil it's quite useless – and all we can use it for is making paths, which may well be what Jesus meant when he talks about trampling it underfoot.

So what is it to be the salt of the earth if we think of it as a kind of guano? Maybe what Jesus is saying is something like this – spread yourselves out into the society like fertiliser and take the message with you and as you do so the society will be transformed, accelerated and will itself begin to yield fruit. It points to what comes after the passage, words familiar in our 1662 Book of Common Prayer – let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.

So being salt of the earth is not about adding a little bit of religious flavour, but it's much bigger – it's about permeating the whole of society, as people grow to maturity. That leads onto the next passage – the law is fulfilled and not abolished. The law is useless if it is just for the devout and religious; instead it needs to become life-transforming and make a real difference throughout society. It needs fertilising – which means the role of the disciple is to spread the message out into society by word and by action; and in that way society will be changed.

So next time you get out the salt to add to your cooking pot think about it not as salt but as a fertiliser – adding nutrition to the soil and dissolving as the plants grow to maturity and draw out the vitality into themselves. And think of Christian faith and action as a fertiliser; without them the plants won't grow. The reason is quite simple: we don't want to hold things back for ourselves but instead we need to allow it to spread out into the soil so that it might flourish and yield a huge crop.

Jesus's message is very simple: the love that is the essence of the law transforms and creates new life from the most barren of soils if only we can dig it in – so let's get digging. Ultimately love is the only fertiliser that really matters. And in a world beset by division and hatred that is the kind of accelerator we really need. Amen