

Salty Spirituality

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 5 February 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 5A

1 Corinthians 2: 1-12; Psalm 112; Matthew 5:13-20

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

My wife Penny and I met at theological college. It was certainly not love at first sight. I was quite introverted, not trying to give away much of who I was, and Penny – well, Penny was very nervous and came across as a terrible caricature of an English middle-class blue stocking type of woman: think, those of you who can remember back that far, of Joyce Grenfell in the old St Trinian's films. Our college was overwhelmingly full of men, with this being only the second year a handful of women had been admitted. So, when I met Penny in the first hour or so after arriving, I thought: *'well, if this is how the women are here, I am simply not going to survive!'*

I guess that was one factor in our initial relationship: sheer survival in an age and culture still trying to come to terms with the equality of women as a whole, never mind wider gender diversity. It was an earlier reminder that, if Penny and I were to minister, it would be as salt. We would be adding fresh flavour to both the Church and the wider world, seeking to provide healing or simply preservation for some of us, and, from time to time, perhaps irritating others into whose wounds we might be placed to aid healing.

Maybe some will have views on how well, or otherwise, we have done that so far. Our hope and prayer is, in the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading today, that we, with others, will never lose out saltiness...

Now, you can have too much salt! I wonder how many of us have experienced what happens when, to add flavour, you tip a full salt cellar over a dish of food and the entire contents pour out. Unfastening the top of a salt cellar at a meal table is of course a frequent practical joke, particularly among young people. At one time, it almost seemed like a daily occurrence at my school dinner table – although, to be honest, a plate full of salt could sometimes seem more appealing than some of the school dinners we were served!

For salt, at least in food, is essentially but one ingredient which helps bring life. It is not meant to be the whole meal. Indeed, similarly, whilst saltpans have their own ecological importance, too much salt, or over salinity, has been a significant issue in agriculture and land use in Australia and further afield. Jesus' encouragement to their followers to be *'the salt of the earth'* is therefore both striking and also tantalising. What do we make of this today?

Jesus words are set within that section of Matthew's Gospel typically known as the Sermon on the Mount. This deliberately presents Jesus as a second Moses, sharing teaching which both affirms the life-giving heart of Jesus' Hebrew faith and also seeks to develop it.

That is why we have Jesus saying, in Matthew 5, verses 17 to 19, that he has '*not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets... but to fulfil.*' If we are literalists, that might seem quite narrowing, and even foreboding. Certainly such verses can be used, and undoubtedly have been used, to resist life-affirming change. For example, some in Matthew's own community might have seen this as providing scriptural justification for resisting the full acceptance of Gentiles in the Church. Maybe Matthew himself even formulated this with an element of that in mind.

Yet, in so far as this goes back to Jesus himself, it actually encourages a much more generous approach to faith and spirituality. Indeed, to my mind, the whole of today's Gospel passage calls us to a deeply life-giving, light-giving, salty spirituality. This encourages us both to share our unique and wonderful distinctive gifts but also does with full appreciation, and even reverence, for the gifts of others, whether traditional or novel.

What a difference it would have made in the past, and what a difference can still be made today, if we were to receive and share the love of God in Jesus Christ in that way! Going back to my old theological college for a moment offers a little example. For the college was famously established in 1854 in the little village of Cuddesdon, five and a half miles out of Oxford. At that time, and later, it was very much like salt in the Church of England. For it originally represented the regained flavour of Anglo-Catholic sacramental faith, and then, subsequently, was a leading contributor in embracing modern science, philosophy and biblical criticism: exploring faith in the contemporary world.

Yet the college's impact on its immediate surroundings was not always so life-giving. One of our beloved biblical tutors, Professor Christopher Evans, had retired to the village, and used to say that, with all the clergy employed there, and would-be clergy, the theological college was rather like a salt-pot. This, he said, could make faith difficult for others in the village. For it was often a problem, he said, when clergy (ordained priests or ministers) are gathered together in numbers. That has been my experience too. Clergy are indeed somewhat like salt and we are best spread out and scattered widely, so that the rest of the Church and our communities can flourish with us, not suffer from us.

What Christopher Evans said about Cuddesdon, is, I believe, true of Christians as a whole. Followers of Christ can help to provide life, flavour, and healing to the world. As Jesus says in today's Gospel reading, this is at the heart of our calling. We can be a part, even a vital element, in good food for the world. Yet if we try to be the whole meal, or even try to concentrate into a large salt cellar, dominating others, then we have actually missed our vocation, our calling.

It is similar to the other metaphor, of sharing light, which Jesus uses to encourage his followers in today's Gospel reading. Of course light is so often a life-giving element. In Jesus' day, it was also even more powerful a metaphor, without the easy taken-for-granted nature of electric light today. Yet even light can be overpowering and destructive. Indeed, perhaps our society today is a little over-lit at times, full of too much glare and intensity. As followers of Jesus, how we are salt, and light, therefore also matters.

As we have been reflecting together in the last few weeks, too much Christianity has been full salt-cellar, over-illuminated, Christianity. This is what we call Christendom Christianity: the desire, unlike Jesus, not only to share what is good but to overpower and abolish everything else, even denying other life-giving Christian ingredients as well. In that form, the salt of Jesus-like faith and living no longer then brings out extra flavour and life, preserving what is valuable, and bringing healing, as it is intended to do.

The light of Christ has also been used to burn and extinguish, or drive some of us into the shadows, denying the need for balance and the importance of darkness for growth and renewal. Instead of adding salt and light to the law, traditions, and experience of others, Christians have also sometimes sought to abolish them; again, a profoundly un-Jesus like approach.

Just imagine for example, how different the history of this continent would have been had more followers of Jesus actually followed Jesus; not abolishing the law and the prophets, the living culture and traditions, of First Nations peoples, but adding their own salt and light, as appropriate, humbly, to the mix.

I have attended many inter-faith gatherings, and occasionally someone will say that it might be helpful if Christians were to give up evangelism. After all, they say, it has caused much harm to others, and they cite some undoubted worrying examples, not least related to Jewish people. Personally I disagree that evangelism is a problem as such. What is almost always being referred to is proselytising, trying to change people's beliefs or culture. Indeed what is sometimes called 'conversion therapy' or 'orientation change' is a particularly vicious form of proselytising exercised against queer people. It is full salt-cellar Christianity, ruining the flavours of others and destroying life in general with over-salinity.

That is not at all the same as genuine Jesus-type evangelism. For evangelism means sharing 'good news' - and ruining or destroying the goodness of others is patently bad news. To share good news lovingly means we therefore need to honour the experiences and identities of others. We can make our contribution by sharing our salt and light but in ways which connect with other life-giving ingredients and flavours of our world.

Today's Gospel passage is thus a call to share good news in positive, healthy, ways, with respect for others and their own law and culture. Our own light, and our own saltiness, does really matter. If you are a queer person, you know this so well, but we can all identify with these words. For way too long, for queer people, our light, our saltiness, has been hidden, forced into the shadows, buried in darkness which has been inflicted upon us.

Even today, in this very city, one of the major cities of the world, queer lives are not all free to be expressed, not least in many faith spaces. That is why this coming Sydney World Pride season is so vital and why those who help share the light and salt of queer faith are so important.

That is why we, here at Pitt Street, have committed ourselves to be a centre of light and salt during Sydney World Pride. For our good news – the good news of queer people of faith and allies – must be shared. Such good news should not be hidden under anything, or quietly 'included'. It needs to shine out – loud and proud.

Let me conclude with a word about the phrase of Jesus about not being like salt that loses its taste, its saltiness.

Now, as I understand it is quite tricky. Salt does not easily lose its saltiness. That is good news for us. For even if we have not been as actively salty as we might have been, we still have the opportunity. However old we are, or in whatever state, we always have the chance to share love with others. Yet it is possible for salt to be of little use, either through contamination, or separation.

Maybe much Christian salt has indeed become contaminated, even toxic, or separated from its true, loving, purposes. Again, however, through grace, there is always the possibility of beginning once more in a new, more refreshing, direction.

Among the Pathways our church community has identified to move forward is that of Engaging - engaging with others. It is not enough for us simply to be salt in this place, or to shine light here on one another, even with such glorious lights as the queer angels currently above us.

Actually, we will become problematic to one another, and others, if we do simply try to make ourselves a salt-cellar, or an over-intense light source. Engaging with others is vital.

We need to be salt that is scattered widely - and light that brings support not oppression to others. And salt and light that works with other elements of life and love, healing and hope, in our world.

That is the spirit of Jesus in our Gospel reading today, which both seeks to honour the light and gifts of others, and to bring our own gifts and insights to enable a greater fulfilment of Love.

Love, the heart of all things, spoken of by many names and in many forms.

Love which belongs to all of us and to none of us, and to no one path of life alone.

That Love which was embodied in Jesus and which we are invited to receive and share.

In the name of Jesus, the Light and the Salt of the world. Amen.