



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The power of influence

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Matthew 5:13

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

We begin our new year at Wesley Mission and share in our All of Staff Service of Dedication. The church's lectionary draws us to Matthew 5:13-20, which has much to say to us.

Jesus teaches his disciples the importance of their part in God's kingdom. The church had an influence far out of proportion to its numbers. The thought of influence upon those who follow would seem a great stretch!

We remind ourselves that the first Christian community was very modest in size. Their power, of necessity, was that of strategic influence, inspired by love of others, rather than by might and muscle.

It is somewhat easier for us, two millennia later, to see the impact and relevance of such words through the lens of history, but for a small, albeit chosen group of people, it is hard to begin to imagine the reach of these words and the missional scope they provide for the Christian community.

The greatest power we exercise is not that which is wielded in strength—but the power of influence. In a year when we shall be talking about 'Innovation' we recognise that meaningful change is brought about by a gentle influence which can translate new ideas into dynamic possibilities.

These words immediately follow the Beatitudes of Jesus in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. The two preceding verses conclude the Beatitudes and introduce our theme. They speak of the inevitability of opposition, after painting a beautiful picture of the life of the Christian.

- Persecution could be seen as evidence of belonging to a better kingdom
- It is a lesson that has been borne out in history across the whole world
- It is a feature of the reaction of an unconvinced world to the claims of authentic Christianity.

At the outset of 2014, we consider the challenges that lie ahead. Each of us is conscious of our own area, but we join together and capture the wider picture of Wesley Mission.

It is the influence of an organisation and church like Wesley Mission that has been able to innovate and bring new ideas to bear, shaping them into transforming programs for the benefit of our community. We have also been able to use that influence to guide areas of our community.

Tom Wright comments that Jesus had in his mind two things to do at one and the same time.

Firstly, he had to show the Jews of his day that this movement really was a fulfilment of all that Israel had believed and longed for. Secondly, he had to show that he and his followers really were living by (and also dying by) the new way he was announcing. He writes, “The tension between these two sometimes seemed fierce, and to this day many people misunderstand it.”

We see that Jesus himself held the two together in this one thought.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”
(Matthew 5:13)

In the ancient world, salt was highly valued. In their daily financial review, if there was such a thing, we would have had the price of gold, silver, the exchange rate for the dollar—and the price of salt!

The Greeks used a word which alluded to salt being related to the divine and some point out that in Latin there is a phrase, “There is nothing more useful than sun and salt.”

We take the words of Jesus, when we use possibly the kindest description of someone: ‘She is the salt of the earth’.

The Beatitudes described the essential nature and character of followers of Jesus and two metaphors are introduced which indicate the influence for good of those who are followers of the same Lord.

If we had the time, we would focus on both ‘salt and light’ because they are deliberately phrased in order to run parallel to one another:

- You are the salt of the earth.
- You are the light of the world.
- Salt must keep its saltiness.
- Light must be allowed to shine.

We mustn’t so individualise the ‘salt and light’ images that we fail to speak with clarity about the world in which the community of faith is set—both then and now!

These two domestic metaphors had a home in the minds of those who heard them on the first occasion as much as they do today. Stott writes, “Every home, however poor, used and uses both salt and light.”

We consider the singularly powerful picture of salt, drawing three conclusions which apply to Wesley Mission.

Salt must not become polluted

There is a conditional aspect to salt—that it must not become polluted. Sodium Chloride is a stable chemical compound, generally resistant to attack but, in certain circumstances, it can become contaminated. With that starting point, we recognise that if we are salt, we too must avoid becoming polluted:

- Here is where our values sit meaningfully
- Here is why our values must be applied

- Here is how salt can be seen to make a difference

RVG Tasker puts it this way, when defining the disciples' influence in their particular situation, for they (and we) must be "a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing or non-existent."

The relationship between purity and salt is reinforced by the fact that Jewish sacrifices were offered with salt. We apply this truth to personal morality, but it speaks very much to the wider context also.

In popular writing on Matthew, William Barclay stressed this very point: "One of the characteristics of the world in which we live is the lowering of standards. Standards of honesty, standards of diligence in work, standards of conscientiousness, moral standards, all tend to be lowered. The Christian must be the person who holds aloft the standard of absolute purity in speech, in conduct, and even in thought."

He also points to a dedication in a book that was written to an individual, "who makes the best seem easily credible".

John Stott, in the later publication of a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, added a comment sent to him to correct his point that "strictly speaking, salt cannot lose its saltiness". The chemist who wrote to him filled in his lack of scientific knowledge by pointing out that whilst sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound, resistant to nearly every attack, it can become contaminated. This contamination comes through mixture with impurities where it becomes useless or even dangerous.

Stott went on to write, "Christian saltiness is Christian character as depicted in the beatitudes, committed Christian discipleship exemplified in both deed and word."

Christians must ensure they do not become assimilated with the impurities of the world around or they will lose their influence.

We connect with this thought the fact that we cannot withdraw from the world—such has been the temptation of narrow and exclusive Christians. Our discipleship and our service are in the harsh reality of a world that does not easily embrace the values that give shape to who we are.

Stephen Dray also draws attention to the fact that salt becomes useless when it is polluted and also harmful "because ground tainted by it becomes sterile".

This means that both disciples and a community can be a poor example to others, which would appear to be the reason Jesus asked the question, "how can it be made salty again?" We must remain salty.

Salt is by nature a preservative

Salt in the ancient world was the commonest of all preservatives. Today we take refrigeration for granted and observe people in supermarkets checking the 'Best By' date on supposedly fresh food.

Salt kept things from going bad and held the process of putrefaction at bay. With this in mind, we transfer our thought to Christians who are called to have an antiseptic influence on life. Placed into the wider context of our work, we are called not only to deliver services but also to be at the heart of our community, offering an alternative to the prevalent decaying attitudes that surround us—this is an aspect of being a counter-cultural community.

Think of friends and acquaintances. There are some in whose company it is easy to be good and there are others who naturally make our conversation and our views of others deteriorate for one reason or another.

When together, is our conversation positive and kind towards one another, especially those not present? This is an acid test about the nature of our life together. I remain convinced that the most helpful contribution Christians make to the wider Australian life is helping to preserve our values:

- to preserve the on-going importance of the family
- to speak a clear word for those who are poorer and left behind in the scramble for the top
- to encourage others to measure life in ways not dominated by success in whatever form that appears.

We are called to be a people through whom God shines a bright light into the dark corners of the world. Far too often people interpret this as showing up evil, rather than enabling people who are stumbling to find their way to gain new direction and purpose. This influence is also emphasised in Jesus' warning that we are to be a city set on a hill.

We may avoid this analogy but the concept of salt is less easy to avoid. Tom Wright observed, "but Israel was behaving like everyone else, with its power politics, its factional squabbles, its militant revolutions." The pervading question must be—how will God keep his world from going bad? - this was the main function of salt when Jesus spoke these words - followers must not lose their distinctive taste.

We are living in an increasingly secular society, where it is common practice to see the Christian community and faith as the butt of people's humour. I don't think it is helpful to shout with indignation in such circumstances. I do, however, believe that we should:

- stand up in the workplace, wherever that might be, as one not ashamed of Christ
- take seriously the injunction of Jesus to make a difference amongst others
- demonstrate our oneness as a people.

As a large non-government agency, we also have to retain our values. Increasingly, we need to operate in such a way that challenges the accepted values of those around us:-

- Amongst those who would deny that certain kinds of abuse and poverty exist
- By being willing to hold onto values amidst the clamour for decreasing public funds
- Even when we feel like a political football and are of no consequence to those who consider themselves powerful.

Salt adds flavour

Perhaps the most obvious quality of salt is that it lends flavour to other things. Although many would be swift to point out that we have perhaps too much salt in our diet, the reality is that for many people it remains an essential ingredient in the cooking process.

The Christian community is meant to add flavour to life and too frequently we have been identified with the exact opposite. Often we have been thought of as a community that takes flavour out of life.

Even after Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire, there came to the throne another emperor, Julian, who wished to put the clock back and bring about the old gods. Going back is the one option we don't have!

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like funeral directors."

Some people are better known for what they are against rather than what they are for.

Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary, as if he were recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to church today, and am not depressed."

We need to rediscover that place we have at the heart of life to bring flavour and taste to everything that is good around us.

One morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, who had spent his life amassing a fortune from the manufacture and sale of weapons, awoke to read his own obituary. The obituary was printed as a result of a simple journalistic error. Alfred's brother had died, and a French reporter carelessly wrote about the wrong brother.

To Alfred, the shock was overwhelming because he saw himself as others saw him—"the dynamite king". He was described as a great industrialist who had made an immense fortune from explosives. As far as the general public was concerned, this was the entire purpose of his life (so said the obituary). None of his true intentions were recognised or given serious consideration. He was quite simply, in the eyes of the public, a merchant of death, and for that alone he would be remembered.

As he read his obituary with shocking horror, he resolved to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life. This would be done by the final disposal of his fortune. His last will and testament resulted in one of the most valued prizes given to this day to those who have done most for the cause of world peace.

This invites me to ask the question: I wonder how it would read if my (or your) obituary suddenly appeared? What will we be most remembered for?

Wesley Mission is more than a local church. We want to remain above futile church politics and narrow-mindedness!

We are living through difficult days. We must look beyond the four walls of a church. I am increasingly conscious of the disappearance of 'God talk' from normal conversation. All this does is leave it to odd balls to fill the gap. Let us hope we are able to find God again before we are completely lost in material objectives! I am conscious also that alcohol and other drugs continue to destroy the fabric of our community and they are creating no-go areas in the city of Sydney. In passing, we recognise that all sides of politics display a continuing propensity to speak for their own constituency. Who will speak and act for the many who are caught in a vacuum of the saddest kind?

Wesley Mission must embrace this word of Jesus and be "the salt of the earth" in our own day. We don't have salt—we are salt. When we feel frustrated with our world, we need to pour out the salt that we are—patience, forgiveness, helpfulness and love—and our ability to preserve the world and make it a more flavoursome place in which to live.