

Matthew 5. 13-20 Ministry, Salt and Light.

This morning we are marking the end of Jo's ministry among us as a licensed minister in the church. It's the end of an era for her and for many of you who have benefited from her dedicated ministry over several years, but although it may be the end of an era, a season characterised by a particular kind of ministry, it's not an end at all in the sense of a full stop. It's not an end in that sense, because I believe that, if we let him, our God is a God of new beginnings, a God of renewal, a God of the next exciting thing.

Jo may have decided for all kinds of understandable reasons to step back from official public ministry, but that doesn't mean that she has said 'goodbye' to ministry. That's because when she became a Christian, and before she ever thought of ordination or dog collars or the like, she became a disciple of Jesus, someone who wanted to be his apprentice, someone who wanted to serve him and others. Becoming a Christian, she became a minister, someone wishing, however falteringly, to serve Jesus and his world.

And the same is true of all of us here this morning who call ourselves followers, disciples, apprentices of Jesus - we are all, every single one of us, ministers, people called to serve. That's what "to minister" means. To be a disciple is to be a minister. We are all one in Christ and as he serves others, he asks us to serve others. Because when we become Christians, disciples of Christ, our identity changes. We are no longer defined by our looks, our background, our education, our jobs, where we live; we now find our identity in Christ – being a follower of Christ is what makes us what we are and what we are becoming. And he calls us all to serve, just as he serves.

For Jo, one season representing a particular kind of ministry has now ended, and she will need some time and the space to explore with God what the next phase of discipleship will look like. We look forward to all that God offers in store for Jo and for all you ministers out there – you who are the body of Christ and find your identity in him.

All of which brings me to this morning's gospel reading, where Jesus addresses his first followers with these very direct words: You are the salt of the earth..." and "You are the light of the world".

One of the things that strikes me most is that Jesus doesn't give the disciples instructions, but rather he tells them what they already are. He doesn't say "You've got to work harder to **be** the salt or the light". Rather, he says his followers already **are** the salt and the light. What can he mean by that?

Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that when we become his disciples we take on something of what is common to salt and light. One thing that salt and light have in common, is that for each of them their form and function are the same. That's very different from many other things.

The bowl I had my Shredded Wheat in at breakfast time is certainly a handy thing for my cereal. But I could use it for my soup at lunchtime, or I could put pot-pourri in it, or I could use it to take up the offering, or even to put the vegetable peelings in. It's more than what it does as a cereal bowl. I could easily use it as receptacle something else. The bowl's form and function differ.

But with salt and with light, what they are *is* what they do. Their identity is defined by what they do. If they do anything different, they stop being what they are. If light doesn't chase away the darkness, it isn't light anymore. If salt doesn't exhibit the chemical properties of salt, if it doesn't taste salty, how can it still be salt?

Another thing they have in common is that neither salt nor light can "do their thing" - be what they are - alone. No one eats salt by itself. Imagine: "What's for dinner?" "We're having a nice plate of salt."! What salt does, it does *with* something else: it penetrates and seasons or preserves food; it dissolves in water and melts ice. Salt often changes things by making them more themselves by bringing out the best in them. Anyone who's had to live with a salt-free diet knows that many things lose their flavour without a little salt-- they seem less "themselves."

And try to imagine light all by itself, without it shining on anything. That stretches our imagination and the effect would be blinding. If I switch on an electric torch, I don't judge its power by staring at the bulb, but by looking at how many objects it lights up. What light does, it does *with* something else: it shines on things so we can see them - light changes things by making them visible, clear and bright.

We are salt and light. Like salt and light, what we are made to do is part of who we are. And, like salt and light, we don't do what we do alone. We're made not for ourselves alone but to do God's work in community.

So who did God make you and me to be? What darkness might there be in the circles in which each of us move that needs the light of Christ to shine through you and me? Is there someone living in the darkness of loneliness waiting for us to transmit Christ's light?

Someone with an unrecognised God-given talent that we can encourage and bring to light?

Maybe someone has recently shone their light on your unrecognized talent -- perhaps you could enhance the life of others with it. Or maybe there is someone for whom you can illuminate the fact that God loves them and longs to know them?

What is it that as salt we can maybe spice up a bit? Perhaps we're called to preserve and heal relationships through a ministry of reconciliation. Perhaps we are called to melt the ice of a hurt or stubborn heart. Perhaps whatever faith and joy God has given us can be shared with someone living in fear and doubt.

Or maybe on a bigger stage God might be challenging some of to become more engaged with matters of social justice. Jesus tells us in today's gospel that he comes not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Today's passage from the Hebrew scriptures in Isaiah may give us some clues about how we might season the world and shed Christ's light on some of its pressing problems:

"Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall spring forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly"

Disciples of Jesus are salt and light whether they like it or not – they just are. Today's gospel doesn't tell us to strive to become something – it just tells us to believe Jesus' word and to accept and live out the new reality he creates in us when we accept the call to discipleship.

And discipleship isn't about knowing things, attending things or belonging to things – it's about setting out on a shared journey, a journey which will change who we are and the way we live our lives, a journey in which we are called to reflect the light of God and season the world wherever and however we encounter other people in daily life.

One commentator puts it quite bluntly – *mission is inherent to discipleship as saltiness is essential to salt and shining is to light. For salt, saltiness is not optional. For the disciple of Jesus, faith cannot just be personal or private – the light cannot be hidden.*

Perhaps understandably, words like mission and evangelism make some of us nervous and wary. So sometimes it's easier to hide our light or deny our saltiness. The gospel reading shows that Jesus recognizes that we can sometimes choose to resist our newly given natures in him so much that we barely resemble disciples at all: salt gets contaminated and lights shoved under cover are in danger of going out.

But really, God asks very little. All God wants is that we be what God has made us to be. He asks us to remember that when we make a choice to follow his ways rather than our own, he promises to fill us with his own Holy Spirit to transform us, be it ever so gradually, so that our natures become more and more like Christ's. Being more like Christ and finding ourselves thinking and acting as he would, gradually becomes more and more 'second nature' to us. And as that happens, we begin more and more to season the world around us and shine his light upon it. It's all summed up in a great little song based on today's gospel, which the children at school have been learning recently:

I am a city on a hill

I am a light in the darkness

Jesus living in me can change the world

God made us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. A light, Jesus tells us, not for our own sake or even for the sake of others, but to give glory to our Father in heaven.

You **are** the salt of the earth...you **are** the light of the world, says Jesus. Jesus does ask much of his followers, but he gives us what we need.

He just asks to remember that our identity is in him, not in our own strength, not in our own selves, not even in a dog collar. We are all ministers. We are all called to be salt and light to the world around us, whatever our daily circumstances may be.

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Or, to put it another way:

I am a city on a hill

I am a light in the darkness

Jesus living in me can change the world.

Amen.

