

# Homily

*For the South Yarra Community Baptist Church in Australia*

Sunday 21 June 2020

Readings: Genesis 16, Psalm 69, Romans 2:17-29

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-20

Dear sisters and brothers,

The “salt of the earth” has always intrigued me. To be honest, I never really understood what it meant. As a young boy, I wondered why the combination of salt and earth functioned as an example of the vocation of Christians. I found it difficult to combine the different elements of the metaphor. To me, salt was not a fertilizer at all. I saw people use salt to do exactly the opposite. When there were weeds in the front yard, on the sidewalk or between the paving stones, salt was dragged in to help remove what nature had naturally produced. Salt was an enemy of plants, not a fertilizer of the soil. Later on, I learnt that in order for the soil to be fruitful, it needed minerals, and thus a balanced amount of salt or a certain degree of saltiness. At the same time, I was aware that Jesus is not teaching agriculture, let alone a lesson about how to optimally use chemicals to make the earth as productive as possible.

I stayed puzzled about the meaning of “salt of the earth” as a theology student. We learnt great things about the Sermon on the Mount and about the cultures of the Ancient Near East, about which you needed to know some basics to make sense of the contents of the Bible. We learnt about the importance of cultural backgrounds and cultural differences, about how language matters, and about the ingenious rhetoric of the evangelists. Matthew was a special case, in particular because of the speeches of Jesus which arguably constitute the core of his gospel. And among those speeches, the Sermon on the Mount holds primacy of place. That was the textual horizon against which to situate the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, etc. In addition, it was the core of Jesus’ preaching about justice, mercy, and the kingdom of heaven.

Yet, all these insights, regardless how valuable they were (and still are) to me, did not aid me to grasp the real meaning of “salt of the earth”. So I let go. I trusted that if someone asked me the meaning of those words, I could tell enough historical, theological and spiritual generalities to shed enough light on the obscurity to expel it. I could refer to the use of ovens in antique Judaism, where the inside surface was treated with salt, because not wood but manure was used as fuel, and that that salt easily became impure and lost its power, or to the well-known potential of salt to preserve food and to protect it from decay in the age before the fridges, or to the curious culinary effect of salt to strengthen the taste of herbs and spices in all kinds of dishes, or to the region of the Dead Sea, where most salt for the use of households in Jesus’ culture came from.

Nevertheless, the obscurity for myself remained. It was only when I started preaching on a regular basis – that must have been some fifteen years ago – and when, through this commitment, my own life of prayer was slowly transformed and deepened, that I realized

that, in order to find a solution for my problem, I needed to apply an insight I had gradually learnt. That insight may serve as key to unlock not only the door to the real meaning of “salt of the earth” but also to that of the “light” for the nations, the city on the top of the mountain and the relation between the Law and its fulfillment.

This key is the following: Jesus came to rewire the electric system of creation. Creation was not the problem, and the salvation he embodied, was of course not alien to creation. Salvation does not come on top of creation but through it, in it, with Him. Jesus came to show again the radicalness of what God wants, the depth of love, the real-life consequences of justice and mercy in His name, the true meaning of the Kingdom. Jesus actually did nothing more, but also nothing less, than manifest the primacy of God in one’s life. He demonstrated the truth and order encapsulated by the Ten Commandments: first recognize God, worship God and only God, and all the rest comes along with it.

That order is never easy for humanity. Time and again there are reasons to modify, freely reinterpret, reorder, amend, question, and even undermine God’s order, and many times these reasons are understandable, common-sense, not bad, even reasonable, perceived necessary, or indispensable. It is only time which teaches that every time, actually, it was above all human benefit, opportunism and logics of commodification which prevailed. The time to realize that, in the end, this was not the right thing to do, because the consequences were destruction, injustice, oppression, etc., is the time of Jesus. Jesus is God’s appeal, but not only moral pressure. Jesus is God’s standing invitation: that all things can be made new again, engrafted on creation, aligned with salvation. Jesus is realizing our participation in God – which is moreover the profound meaning of his Ascension into heaven. We are like the men of Galilee, staring at the sky, desiring to follow Him, but bound to our role here on earth.

This reading key – Jesus as embodying, remembering, universalizing and at the same time radicalizing God’s message to the people of Israel – helps us comprehend what it means that he urges his followers, right after the Beatitudes, to be “salt of the earth”. For of course – how could it not be the case! – it is the Old Testament which resonates here. “Salt” makes the hearers of Matthew’s gospel think of the covenant. Here is a foundational verse from the Pentateuch: “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Leviticus 2:13). Clearly, salt is used within the symbolic framework of the relation between Israel and God. Salt seems an indispensable ingredient of any offering. This undoubtedly reinforces the agricultural meaning and universal importance of salt for maintaining the goods of the earth. Salt is thus associated with idea of keeping something, of cherishing something, of taking care of something, of reassurance, trust, fides, faith.

The verse from the Torah significantly resounds in a story telling one of the so many battles of Israel with its neighbors. “Abijah engaged in battle, having an army of valiant warriors, four hundred thousand picked men; and Jeroboam drew up his line of battle against him with eight hundred thousand picked mighty warriors. Then Abijah stood on the slope of Mount Zemaraim that is in the hill country of Ephraim, and said: ‘Listen to me, Jeroboam and all Israel! Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?’” (2 Chronicles 13:3-5). In other words,

in the midst of a situation of enmity and tension, reference is made to salt being a powerful and trustworthy symbol of loyalty. Not the kind of loyalty that is the result of human interests and negotiations, but the ultimate loyalty: God's covenant.

Another intense remembrance of this idea of salt is found in the prophet Ezekiel. Like Leviticus, salt is connected to offering and sacrifice: "On the second day you shall offer a male goat without blemish for a sin offering; and the altar shall be purified, as it was purified with the bull. When you have finished purifying it, you shall offer a bull without blemish and a ram from the flock without blemish. You shall present them before the Lord, and the priests shall throw salt on them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the Lord" (Ezekiel 43:22-24). Again, salt is connected to preservation, in the sense of a necessary element to keep things pure and to preserve their quality.

Let us now with this knowledge return to Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste [lit. 'has turned mad'], how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (Matthew 5:13). It is critical to remind that this verse, where the salt is mentioned, follows immediately after the Beatitudes. Eight times, there is a sentence beginning with 'Blessed are...', and those have been at the center of your reflections last week, if I am well informed. Then comes an intermediate verse were, grammatically speaking, the focus shifts from 'blessed are' (in the third person plural) to the admonition "rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:12), which is continued to addresses in the second person plural: "your reward is great in heaven" (id.). But this is not an automatism. Jesus would not have to teach and to instruct if this were already evident, or at the very least sufficiently clear. It needs to be repeated; it needs to be reinforced; it needs to be shown, again and again, by saints of God, holy persons, who share and borrow their holiness from the Lord.

Our verse about the "salt of the earth" is the first one with the direct address "you are" immediately after the Beatitudes. This particular position implies that we have to devote special attention to it. We now know that "salt" is to be related first and foremost to the covenant with God, and we also know that Jesus' role is to reinvigorate that covenant, so as to make sure that the flow of God's graces is no longer impeded; in other words, that his words of liberation and his Word of (his) Life are smoothly integrated into our existence. On close inspection, Jesus' whole speech is circling around that fundamental thrust. It entails that followers of Jesus, who are permeated by the content of the Beatitudes and thus set them forth in their own lives and destinies, do not only do this because they are inspired by a particular master who speaks engaging words of wisdom, but that they do it to continue the covenant with God in a new way.

That is at once what it means to be "light of the world" or light of the "nations" – *lumen gentium*, which is not only the title of one of the most important documents issuing forth from the Second Vatican Council (which for me, as a Roman Catholic Christian, holds particular importance to the present day), but which also echoes prophetic sayings from Isaiah. This reference to Isaiah from the gospel of Matthew corresponds with the same logic as the one I laid bare with respect to Ezekiel and 2 Chronicles and the salt. Christians, or any followers of Jesus, have to interiorize an uncompromising love for God. I regularly challenge my students when I straightforwardly, and slightly provocatively, contend –

thereby actually undermining the very presuppositions of the catechetical model in which most of them were raised – that Christians are primarily God-seekers, not Jesus-imitators. After all, the Jesus of the gospels persistently refers to his Father, whom he can intimately address, and we through Him, with Him, and in Him, as Abba.

The logic I have pointed at concerning the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” is identical with the one which clarifies and illuminates the relation between the Law and Christ. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18).

Dear sisters and brothers, I wholeheartedly wish that we open ourselves for the truth, beauty, and goodness of these words. That we let them enter into our minds and bodies and societies, that we are inspired by them and set them forth in our prayers and commitments. I hope that we are thrilled by Jesus’ exhortation to become “salt of the earth” – not to ruin what we consider weed but to give bones, legs, arms and hands to God’s unbreakable covenant. Amen.