

## Salt

### Matthew 5.13-16

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer

I want to talk to you, as Jesus did in today's reading from Matthew, about salt. Salt allows us to do many amazing things – things that we now take for granted but which, without salt, would be impossible. Disinfectants and antiseptics, detergents, medicines, clothes, cars, pipes, houses, foods all rely on salt or products that we make from salt as we've seen from the slideshow earlier. Man has known about the power of salt since ancient times but in the last 200 years, our ingenuity has allowed us to harness that power in so many different ways.

Now let's do a bit of chemistry – humour me, I have to plug the industry when I can. We all know that salt is made from two basic elements, sodium and chlorine and in 1807, Sir Humphrey Davy managed to isolate and identify chlorine as a basic chemical element for the first time. Throughout the 19th century, more and more discoveries showed how vital an element chlorine was to life on earth. In 1892, an American chemist called Hamilton Castner invented a new process to make chlorine by passing electricity through salty water or brine and at the same time, an Austrian chemist called Karl Kellner made the same discovery.

Rather than waste their money employing legions of lawyers to argue about who was first, they got together and founded a company which they called the Castner Kellner Alkali Company and proceeded to build plants all around Europe, including the one that you may have noticed if you drive along the Runcorn Expressway, down beside the Mersey.

But I don't want to stand up here this morning and bore you with a lecture on the history of the UK chemical industry, I want to go back and think again about that basic starting point for all that development – I want to go back to salt and to our reading today from Matthew. This short reading comes from the central part of the Sermon on the Mount, quite early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is preaching to the great crowd gathered before him and the section that we are interested in comes immediately after the Beatitudes.

Let me remind you of how it starts

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.

The imagery in this little reading is so powerful and so basic that it echoes down through 2000 years and is as real to us today as it was to those crowds sitting on rocks on the mountainside in Palestine. We all understand about salt. We all know that salt changes the flavour of our

food. We all know that a little salt can lift food from being bland and tasteless to being full of flavour. We all know that too much salt can spoil our food and make it inedible and we all know that without salt in our diets we die. We all know these things today and those people in that crowd listening to Jesus knew them just the same.

This little reading has been used as the basis of some very powerful preaching through the ages and I wanted to share a couple of examples of how this amazing imagery of Jesus has stirred people to action and changed their lives.

My first example goes back to 1936 and a sermon preached in Germany in the run up to the war. It was at a time of huge turmoil in Europe and particularly in Germany where Hitler and the National Socialists had risen to power and the sermon was preached by the famous German pastor Martin Niemoller. The Nazis had managed to influence the official church in Germany to go along with its appalling doctrines in spite of the obviously anti-Christian nature of those doctrines.

Niemoller was a leader of the Confessing Church founded by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth which opposed those anti-Christian doctrines of the Nazi regime. Niemoller had watched many of his fellow pastors imprisoned for speaking out and not long after giving this sermon he was himself arrested and imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and Dachau for 9 years.

The regime were desperate for these rebel preachers to toe the line and to adapt their beliefs to fit with the majority and Niemoller used this line from Matthew's gospel to underline to his congregation why it was so vital that they did not allow their beliefs to be diluted in this way.

As he put it, if our faith loses its unique flavour, its saltiness, then it will have no impact when it is cast into the great 'stew' of the world. We have to hold to the word of God and protect its unique flavour. If it loses that unique flavour then it is worthless. Our duty as Christians is to ensure that our church and our lives reflect the life of Christ and not the life of the world.

These were brave men indeed to stand up to a brutal and oppressive regime because they heard the voice of God. Many, like Niemoller, spent years in prison. Some, like Bonhoeffer never made it out of prison and died for their beliefs at the hands of the brutal regime.

We may not have the troubles that Niemoller and his congregation had in 1936, where the state was trying to impose its will on the church but we have our own pressures in 2014 that threaten to reduce the saltiness of our beliefs. We live in a secular age where our beliefs are considered odd and out of step with the society around us. It would be all too easy to conform to this pressure, to reduce our saltiness and blandly reflect the world around us.

How convenient if we just stuck to looking after our beautiful church buildings to provide a suitably historical backdrop to the community. How convenient if we just provided a picturesque venue for hatches matches and despatches. And how bland.

So that was in 1936, when Neimoller used our reading to inspire the members of the confessing church. Now let's fast forward 23 years to 1959 and another great preacher in a time of trouble and turmoil and this sermon was preached in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama by Martin Luther King.

Now the surprising thing about this sermon was that Dr King took as his inspiration that day a man who was not a Christian at all but a Hindu, Mohandas K Gandhi, better known to us all as Mahatma Gandhi.

In the words of Martin Luther King, "It is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church".

Why is this relevant for us today? Well because Dr King takes as his example of Gandhi's leadership the famous Salt March of 1930. Gandhi was determined to free India from British Colonial rule but he was equally determined to avoid violence as the means to achieve that end. Now one of the most iniquitous laws that impacted on every person in India at that time was the salt tax.

All Indians were obliged to pay a tax on salt and, to reinforce the tax, the government had the exclusive right to manufacture this precious commodity. It was illegal for anyone but the government to make salt, whether through digging it out of the ground or by boiling away seawater. All such activity was criminal and would be punished. As we have seen, salt is such an essential ingredient in life that there was not a single person who was not impacted by this tax and so it was a very powerful tool for Gandhi to use to mobilize the population against the government.

Ghandi made it widely known that he intended to march the 240 miles from his Ashram at Sabarmati to the coast at Dandi and that once he reached the sea, he intended to boil some seawater and break the law by making salt. Before setting out, Ghandi wrote to the Viceroy of India explaining his intent and despite a response from the Viceroy warning him of the consequences of breaking the law, he set out with about 70 followers. Over the course of the march, the numbers continued to grow and Ghandi and his followers finally broke the law for the first time at Dandi on April 6th.

Over the next month, Ghandi continued to make his way along the coast, making salt and preaching to the crowds and the civil disobedience escalated. About a month later, the authorities had had enough and Ghandi was arrested and put in jail.

All told, some 80,000 people were jailed for illegally making salt but, of course, the genie was out of the bottle. People had seen the power of non violent civil disobedience and the inexorable drive towards Indian independence had begun – all because of a few grains of salt.

This is what so inspired Martin Luther King. Here was an example of someone standing up to injustice but doing so in a way that was entirely consistent with a Christian path in life. Ghandi so inspired King, that his example drove King's plan for the non violent civil rights movement in the United States in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

Ghandi, like King was of course finally the victim of violence himself – both men dying from an assassin's bullet and let me read from the almost prophetic words in Dr King's sermon on the subject of Ghandi's death.

"And the final thing that I would like to say to you this morning is that the world doesn't like people like Ghandi. That's strange isn't it? They don't like people like Christ. They don't like people like Abraham Lincoln. They kill them. And this man, who had done all of that for India, this man who had given his life and who had mobilized and galvanized 400 million people for independence so that in 1947 India received its independence and he became father of that nation. This same man, because he had decided that he would not rest until he saw the Muslims and the Hindus together. And one of his fellow Hindus felt that he was a little too favourable towards the Muslims and shot him. And here was a man of non violence, falling at the hand of a man of violence. Here was a man of love falling at the hands of a man of hate. This seems the way of history"

And Dr King closed by quoting the words of the poet John Oxenham who was actually from Manchester...

"To every man there openeth a way, and ways and a way  
The high soul climbs the high way, and the low soul gropes the low.  
And in between on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro.  
But to every man - to every nation, to every civilization – there openeth a high and a low way.  
Every soul decideth which way it shall go."

And God grant that we shall choose the high way, even if it will mean assassination, even if it will mean crucifixion, for by going this way we will discover that death would be only the beginning of our influence. And so it proved for Martin Luther King himself on the 4th of April 1968 when hate once again killed love with the assassins' bullet.

So let's take inspiration from people who are willing to stand up for their beliefs. From Ghandi and Martin Luther King to the brave Germans of the Confessing Church and their leaders like Neimoller and Bonhoeffer who were imprisoned and murdered to preserve the saltiness of our faith. These people lived Christ's word in the Sermon on the Mount. They truly were the salt of the earth and everything tasted different because of them.

They could have taken the easier choices and been a bit less salty – a bit more bland but no one remembers bland. They were salt that never lost its saltiness and so they made a difference to the world in which they lived. At any time, they could have given up but, as Jesus tells us, when that happens there is no way back. Salt that has lost its saltiness can never be made salty again – its good for nothing so let's do our own, much easier, bit to keep our faith full of salt. The world should taste differently because of this Christian community. If it doesn't then the fault is ours.

**Tom Crotty**