

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

One of my favourite phrases is this: to be worth your salt. To be worth your salt means that you are worth your wages. It's a phrase that acknowledges your contribution, your value, and your competence. It also acknowledges that those who work hard deserve recognition for their efforts.

So we begin with a notion that salt is important; it is valuable, and it is meaningful. After all, it contributes so much to food. Can you remember how big the difference made to a dish when the salt is added? It is night and day.

So, what does it mean when Jesus begins speaking to his disciples and calls them 'the salt of the earth'? We might consider it like this: if we are the salt of the earth, we are an essential ingredient in this world. Salt gives flavour, it is even required for human health and wellbeing (in the right quantity, of course). There is a lovely and affirming message that each of us matter, and what we do matters, and that we should be encouraged and affirmed in this. Jesus is cheering us on in this metaphor, and wants us to flourish. Just as salt improves food, our presence in the world is an opportunity for us to also make it a better place, if we know the potential within ourselves.

And arguably, we do not wish to waste this potential either. We do not wish to become the salt which is no longer useful and cannot be used in cooking, and can only be used to grit a pathway or a road (even though that itself is useful in certain seasons in the right climate). We want to be useful, and make the most of our 'saltiness'.

The other part of Jesus' metaphor is this: you are the light of the world. This is an easier one to interpret, and it's equally positive.

Something as big as a city cannot easily be disguised, and even a single light will shine brightly and can be visible from far away. Jesus argues that nobody lights a lamp in order to then put it somewhere that limits its function, but they place it on a lampstand, so it is most effective. That way, many benefit from the light of the lamp.

Jesus then makes this personal. We all carry light within us. We can choose to let it shine before others, and for others, so that they may see more clearly. The point of this is not to glorify ourselves, but to give thanks to God for the gifts we have been given and the wisdom we show in how we use them.

There is an additional lesson from this – goodness shines through. When we act from a position of empathy, kindness, compassion and love, our actions are underpinned by a

goodness which is almost tangible. They are recognisable from afar, and they are as inspiring and as welcome as a beacon to those who are trying to navigate the darkness.

But Jesus does not remain entirely focussed on us. In the second part of the Gospel passage, Jesus speaks about what he has come to do, and to address some of the expectations that the crowd might have of him.

The first is that he has come to abolish the religious laws, and to replace the prophets and their prophecies. Jesus outright denies this – he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets. In fact, he sees great value in both the law and the wisdom of the prophets. He encourages the crowd to obey the commandments, and to help others to do so too. He says people who do will “be called great in the kingdom of heaven”, which is a sign for us that this is the way to go.

From his opening remarks to the end of his teaching, I think that Jesus was intending to encourage and inspire the crowd. He wants them to understand their potential – the light which is within them and helps people see, the salt that brings flavour to food and is valuable – and he wants them to use them to the full, in fulfilling the religious laws and customs of the time, and heeding the words of the prophets.

So what does Jesus want us to do all these years later? The same thing. We are to follow the religious commandments which we have been given, foremost among them the commandment to love one another, and we are to listen to the wisdom of God, as offered through the teachings of Christ and the writings of the disciples.

May Jesus be with us as we live out these commandments, and may we be both salt and light, both now and into the future.

Rev. Dr. Emily Fraser
All Saints, South Hobart and St Raphael's, Fern Tree
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
8 February 2026