

Year A, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1-12, 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

The early part of today's gospel reading is really familiar, isn't it? I've known it since childhood. Maybe you have too. And, like me, you may have sung *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine*.

But what does it mean? How do we let our light shine? For that matter how is it that we are light at all?

And how salty are we? And, in any case, what does this mean?

Because the words are so familiar we may not have thought much about them, at least, not for a long time. In fact, I think the way that we have been taught somewhat dilutes what Jesus was trying to convey.

Let's start with the light. In Matthew Jesus says *You are the light of the world*. Elsewhere, in John (8:12; 9:5) Jesus says, *I am the light of the world*. We need to hold these two statements in parallel. Both are true. And they reflect, even update, words written in the book of Isaiah.

In Isaiah there is a progression from the familiar Advent verse in chapter 9² *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light* to the later mention of light such as in this morning's reading where we heard: *your light will rise in the darkness*. When Isaiah says 'your' he is referring to Israel, God's covenant people – so it applies to us too, also God's covenant people - on whom the light has shone, and who also shine. Jesus is that light.

We too are light. The people of God actually become the light of the very covenant into which they have entered with God. So we are, in reality, the light that shines in the darkness. It is so much more than *this little light of mine*, the faint glow of my own virtue. It is the great light that is Jesus. It is a result of his invitation to enter into a covenant relationship with God.

No wonder Jesus tells us not to hide the light but to let it shine. Paul writes to the Romans (10:14). *How can the unsaved believe in the one of whom they have not heard?* And we might ask: how are non-believers going to be attracted to the light of Jesus if they can't see it shining?

Jesus kind of labours the point. *Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.* It is thought that he might have been thinking of the town of Safed, 3000 feet up on a mountainside in Northern Israel that can be clearly seen from the shores of lake Galilee where Jesus was speaking.

Then Jesus talks about putting a candle under a bushel – an absurd notion obviously, because then it cannot be seen or give out light. A bushel was a container or basket for measuring dry goods. I have a candle here and a bushel. Let's see how much light the bushel allows through. It's ridiculous, isn't it?

Jesus described John the Baptist as a light during the time he was in the wilderness pointing to Jesus (John 5:35). And we see something similar elsewhere. Think of Moses. Moses face shone so brightly after he had spent time intimately with God that he had to cover his face with a veil. And what about us? Paul writes (2 Corinthians 3:18) *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (or reflect) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.* We become the light.

So it is not *this little light of mine*; it is this great light of his.

Now I've skipped over salt. Where does salt fit in? Jesus links it with light. *Ye are the salt of the earth... Ye are the light of the world.* What's the connection? Well, of course, they both have an effect beyond themselves. We know about light and we know about salt. Salt brings out flavour; it preserves and purifies.

But beyond this commonality there is something else which connects light and salt which I think Jesus may have had in mind. It is summed up in one word that springs out of God's relationship with us. It is the word covenant.

Now it doesn't occur to us to think of covenant in connection with salt, but Jesus's Jewish listeners would have. In Old Testament times two parties would eat salt together to signify that an agreement between them was a legally binding covenant. For instance, a covenant between the line of David and God is referred to as a covenant of salt in 2 Chronicles (13:5). This is relevant because salt is incorruptible. It cannot be changed.

Maybe Jesus was thinking of this when he asked *if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?* That salt might not be salt is completely unfeasible.

The phrase salt of the covenant crops up in connection with the sacrificial arrangements God made for the children of Israel so they remain in covenant relationship with him. They were to add salt to their sacrifices. (See Leviticus 2:13). Interestingly, it was the grain offerings which were to have salt added. Part of these were given to the priests – God’s representatives – for them to eat. Here again we have the ingestion of salt as a sign of a binding covenant.

So when Jesus says *ye are the salt of the earth* he is not saying that you are the crème de la crème on earth but that we are the expression, the confirmation, of God’s abiding, legal covenant, or contract, with mankind.

Now there is a reason why I chose to read from the King James Version this morning. It is not that I grew up with it, which I did. No, it’s that the King James follows the tradition of William Tyndale who first translated the bible into English. He resurrected the former English use of ‘thou’ for you singular and ‘ye’ for you plural.

So Jesus does not say *thou art the salt of the earth* or *thou art the light of the world* but ‘ye’. You plural, we together are the salt, we together are the light, we are to shine collectively.

One or two grains of salt here and there will not make much impact. But salt together in a saltshaker can be far more effective. One lit candle will shine, but several candles together will shine brighter.

So let me summarise. We together are the salt of the earth, the salt of the covenant. We are salt just by being Christian believers, because the Spirit of Jesus dwells in us. How salty we are depends on the extent to which we allow the Spirit full rein.

We together are the light of the world. How much light we emit depends on the intimacy of our relationship with Jesus. It depends on how much we contemplate the Lord’s glory.

Now we together are a small company here at St Mungo. And each one of us contributes in some way to the church as a whole. We have arranged for light to shine out through the stained-glass windows when it is dark. And we have the Taizé service and Night Church when outsiders join us.

But I want to set out a challenge this morning, a question to ponder.

Should we be considering doing something that is outside of our building and Sunday services? Something where those outside will see the light expressed, as Jesus says, by our good works, rather than it being hidden under the bushel of the church building?

I don't have the answer. Just a niggling feeling that relying on, and praying for – even inviting - the non-churched to come into our services – which are good things to do – a niggling feeling that this is not quite *enough by way of letting our light shine.* Amen

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8 February 2026