

## Being Salt – Matthew 5:13

Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

There was a time when Jesus was teaching His followers when He said:

“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 by men. (Matthew 5:13)

If you are a follower of Jesus, then this describes you too – not in the sense of being a job description – “Go and do salty things” and He doesn’t say it in terms of becoming more salty – “Go and get saltier” but as a statement of fact – “You are salt”; it’s who you are.

When you become a follower of Jesus it’s as if there is a chemical change in who you are – your essence, and you become something you weren’t before.

You don’t become saltier the more you pray or the more you do good things; when you are a Christian, you are salt.

Now in the UK we don’t think of salt as being that important or that valuable; you can buy 1kg of it in Tesco for 36p! Some of us like to have it on our chips and we keep being told to have less because it increases our blood pressure.

But if we lived in a country like Palestine 2000 years ago, the way we would think about salt would be totally different.

The people who heard Jesus say this would have known the true value of salt and to understand what Jesus was saying, I think we need to know what they would have understood Jesus was meaning.

If you live in a hot country – especially if you are a manual worker as most people were, you sweat and lose salt from your body and can suffer from hyponatremia – sodium deficiency.

The symptoms of this are muscle cramps, nausea, vomiting and dizziness. Eventually lack of salt can lead to shock, coma and death. To avoid this, you need about 1g of salt every day.

Salt isn't expensive – almost everyone could afford it or find it, but without enough of it you die. People may not be able to afford gold – but you can live without it; you can't live without salt.

It was seen as so important that Roman soldiers were given salt as part of their pay, recognising that they couldn't survive without it, which is where the word 'salary' comes from.

But the most common use of salt, and the meaning that Jesus' hearers probably understood the most, was that salt was their main preservative

Palestine is hot and in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century there were no refrigerators, so when they killed an animal or fish, their two choices were to eat it very quickly or dry and preserve it with salt; if you rub it into the fish or meat before you dry it, the salt disinfects and kills the bacteria on the meat that would make it rot.

Some of Jesus' followers were fishermen and they would have known that you had to gut the fish and then rub salt into them very quickly otherwise they would rot and stink and they would have to be thrown away.

All of Jesus listeners would have known the smell of rotting fish and meat and they would have known the benefit of having salt on a daily basis.

When times were hard they would have known the benefit of salt because it meant they and their families could still eat some meat and fish when times were hard.

I've heard people say that "the salt of the Earth" makes the world taste nice; I don't believe that this is what Jesus was saying at all – salt is much more important than that!

I want to go on and talk about the Crown Church.

I know that many of us will have heard this story before, but it's the story of how God brought the Crown into being.

In the early 1990's some of the leaders of Newfrontiers (the family of churches we belong to) were praying and believed that God gave them a picture of a bow and arrow stretching back over the UK and as it stretched it gained energy

to shoot the arrow out into the World. They believed that this was God speaking about a church-planting strategy for the UK, but also to affect the Nations.

Some time later David Devenish (a church leader in Bedford) was on holiday in Ephesus and while he was there, God spoke to him about Paul's church planting strategy where he trained people in Ephesus:

He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:9-10)

Through this, everyone in the province of Asia heard God's Word!

Dave took this to be a church planting strategy for the Midlands. And following this model, started 2 years of training called the Midlands Initiative.

At the time (c.1996) I was one of the leaders in The King's Arms church in Bedford, heading towards being appointed as an elder there. Everything was going well and Louise and I had no plans to move away.

But because the Midlands Initiative was starting and looked exciting, we signed up (still with no plans to move!)

Then, just after the first meeting, I had a very vivid dream where I was leaving Bedford and arriving somewhere to start a church. The dream was very clear and detailed and I tried to draw the places I had seen in it.

But I didn't know where it was.

For the next 18 months we visited places in the Midlands looking for 'the place' but didn't find it.

Then I sensed God speaking about being sent where there was a need and the type of church we believed God wanted us to lead (multicultural!) and picked Handsworth.

As we were driven round just before moving here, we saw the places I had seen in the dream!

The point of saying this is that it wasn't our good idea to start the Crown in Handsworth because it was next on the list or because anyone told us to; I believe with all my heart that God chose to start the Crown when and where and with who He wanted.

It was all God's idea from start to finish.

And God has brought the people who are part of it.

Some of us know that God spoke to us and said "This is the Church!" Others of us just happened to get into university nearby or get moved here by UK Border Agency or move because of jobs. Others of us grew up here and God has led you to this church.

And some others didn't know God but met someone who is part of the church here and through that, came to know Jesus for yourselves; others still wouldn't say that you are a Christian or follow Jesus, but you're here because the people are alright, there are donuts and, maybe you have some questions you wouldn't mind getting answers for.

You might think that you are here by accident, but I don't believe that any of us are. There is nothing random in God starting the Church.

### **So why did it happen?**

### **What are we doing here?**

I believe that God looked at this area and decided that it needed salting.

Not in a little sprinkling 'on your chips' way, but in a 'rub it deep into the meat and stop the rot' way.

And that is what He is still doing. He has brought us here to rub us (and all other Christian churches) into our city.

It's very easy to underestimate what God has done through the Crown; it's easy to think "what difference are we really making?"

And I can't answer that, other than to say 'a lot!'

Once the salt is on the fish and it's dried and preserved, you don't really notice it; if it's not salted right though, then you definitely do!

We left some sausages in the fridge one summer then the power was turned off. We returned a few weeks later to the worst smell I've ever smelt!

There is an old film called "It's a wonderful life" –it's the story of a man who says 'I wish I had never been born' and then an angel comes and gives him a chance to see what life would have been like if he had not been born – and it affected everything! The whole town would have been different if he hadn't been around.

I believe that if God hadn't called the Crown into being and rubbed this salt into this city, then things would have been different.

**Contact** has served around 80 people a week for the last 6 years and has provided much more than English lessons. People have been supported and helped and loved and believed in. And for many people it has been a real lifeline.

In October 2006 a young mother called Musammat Mumtahana who lived in Radnor Road hanged herself and her 2 children. Every week Contact meets and serves people who are in equally vulnerable positions.

**Asylum Seekers:** About 10 years ago 1000 asylum seekers were housed in Handsworth – we came to know and love some of them. I know that the local churches responded really well to this. We have no idea what difference it has made to people's lives that they were placed somewhere that God had put some salt.

**Tragedies** Over the years that the Crown has been here we have been able to walk with people through hard times – I know for many people this had made a difference

And, over the years we have met lots of '**regular people**' – just getting on with their lives but actually spiritually dead. And as Salt has been rubbed into them, some have come to know the Love and forgiveness of God

And we've also had the privilege of **exporting some salt** too – to Bromsgrove, Swansea and Bolivia and to Central Asia – in Dan and Lucy's case, to a place that didn't have any Salt.

Jesus went on to say that if salt loses its saltiness then it is no good for anything other than being trampled.

This is a bit confusing because as chemistry teachers will tell you; salt is a very stable compound that doesn't deteriorate.

But in Palestine, salt came from the Dead Sea and was a white powder with salt in it, but also with other minerals. Apparently salt would dissolve and wash away quicker than the other chemicals, meaning that you could be left with white powder that looked like salt, but didn't taste like it and didn't stop your fish rotting.

When this was the case, they would use it like grit to 'salt' the pathways up to the Temple and so people would literally trample it underfoot.

'Unsalty salt' was the stuff that had been sitting there in a pile for years not being used.

That's not why we are here; God has brought us here for a city that desperately needs God's Grace to be rubbed into it. That's what we're for.

What God wants from us is willingness – He loves to hear us saying "Here I am – use me."

And He will. He has big plans to use us here in the Crown.

I want to finish by asking for us to pray for the Crown – for the places He is already rubbing us into the city and for the ways He will use us in the future.