

We are Salt, We are Light

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

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Isaiah 58.1-91 -12, Matthew 5.13-20

Jesus tells his followers: *You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.*

A poem by the late Australian cartoonist and author Michael Leunig begins:

When the heart
Is cut or cracked or broken,
Do not clutch it;
Let the wound lie open.
Let the wind
From the good old sea blow in
To bathe the wound with salt,
And let it sting.ⁱ

That is the thing about salt. It is not a soothing balm like aloe vera or honey which can be slathered on a sore spot – an optimal dilution is needed for healing effect – and even so it can sting as it cleanses and purifies. But too much and it can dry and burn.

Sodium chloride or table salt makes up around 0.4 per cent of our body weight – a very similar concentration to that in seawater. We can taste it in our sweat and in our tears, and it plays a part in our nerve signals, muscle contractions and many other functions. We need to replace it daily, but too much can affect our kidneys, blood pressure, cause stomach cancer and so on.ⁱⁱ

Salt is an essential part of our diet, as well as a food preservative, it enhances the taste of other foods– sharpening or contrasting with other flavours - just a pinch can transform a whole pot of soup and bring our taste buds to life, but again too much and it becomes inedible or unhealthy.

Likewise healthy soil contains salt which helps draw water to root systems, but when the balance is upset, when water tables rise due to over-clearing, and soil becomes saline, the process reverses and salt robs water from roots and burns them.

So, here is the thing about salt - it is essential to life, it is potent, it is also sharp and needs to be used with measured care. When Jesus says to his followers “You are the salt of the earth” he is calling upon something entrenched and powerful in our nature. Note he isn’t asking us to try and become like salt. He says we *are* the salt of the earth. We are what we are. It’s what we do with this innate quality that is the question.

And so with light. We are not asked to try and become like the light. We are told that we *are* the light of the world. These words are said both to the disciples and to the crowd that had gathered (Matt 7:28) – to all of us. How wonderful to put the two qualities together – a quality of earth and a quality of air – one concentrated and gritty, the other diffuse and intangible.

Imagine a person who perfectly embodies both salt and light. Imagine a community or a nation that perfectly embodies both salt and light.

Isaiah helps us to do this. A salty people will both sting and heal the wounds of their culture – by naming the problems and addressing them. They will “shout out” and “not hold back!” They will lift up their voices like trumpets. They will “loose the bonds of injustice” and “undo the thongs of the yoke” - they will work for justice and freedom, feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, care for strangers as for family, repair broken relationships, resolve conflict, and restore community. “You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” For the past few weeks, we have brought to mind the people of Minneapolis who are truly being salt and literally taking to their now unsafe streets to protect their neighbours. And there are so many other causes in our world that call for salty righteous anger. No bland tasteless conformity or acceptance of the unacceptable, but caustic truth telling alongside measured and peaceful protest. With a dose of salt in our veins, our light “shall break forth like the dawn”: “your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.” People of light see clearly, bear the hope of a new day, and dispel fear.

Jesus also acknowledges, however, the human tendency to not be as salty or as luminous as we might. While salt cannot lose its taste, it can be contaminated, or it can be so far diluted as to be useless. We might be too sparing or careless in our use of salt. And rather than shine “like a city built on a hill” we might hide our lamp under a basket, lie low, and keep to ourselves.

We might do this out of apathy, or by the art of procrastination or even shyness. Or perhaps out of exhaustion – the work of reforming and caring, of healing and sharing, and building up, the long process of reconciliation, can be wearisome and sometimes, dispiriting. Often, when we care very deeply about something we can feel as though we take one step forward and two steps back. How do we carry on when our burden seems heavy and the road very long?

Let’s remember that we *are* salt. Salt is essential to who we are in body and in soul. We *are* light. That is the root of our spirit and very being. We need to reflect on what has depleted or dimmed us. We need to recollect ourselves. We can pause, take breath, heal. We can expose our hurt and name the causes of our diminishment, and we can accept healing salt and light from our companions and from the earth that sustains us.

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ⁱ Michael Leunig, from *The Prayer Tree*, HarperCollins, 1991

ⁱⁱ Len Fisher, *How Much Salt is in a Human Body*, BBC Science Focus <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/how-much-salt-is-in-a-human-body>