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| Hymns: | 526 | “Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy” |
| | 463 | “Deep in the shadows of the past” |
| | 495 | “Dear Lord and Father of mankind” |
| | 95 | “To God be the glory, great things he has done” |

Readings: Jeremiah Isaiah 55:1-5
Matthew 5:11-16

“SALT & LIGHT”

I'll be preaching in Chester cathedral this evening. You'll understand, of course, what an important pilgrimage this is will be for me. After 40 years in the wilderness (England), this latter day Moses will be on the verge of entering the promised land – the land flowing with milk and honey, the land where they speak the language of heaven. So the pulpit of Chester cathedral will be for me what Mount Nebo was for Moses. The place from which I can get a distant view of everything that my life's journey has been all about. I ought to add quickly that the comparison ends there. It was on Mount Nebo that Moses snuffed it. I have no intention of doing that in the lofty pulpit of Chester cathedral this evening.

It's no surprise that the good folk of Chester have picked out of the set readings for this Week of Prayer for Church Unity the verse from Matthew chapter five which declares that the followers of Jesus are to consider themselves “salt and light”. The county of Cheshire is, after all, the heart of Britain's salt mining industry. It provides 57% of all the salt used within this country of ours. So I'm happy enough to go with the title chosen for this evening's sermon even though I shall need to produce quite a different manuscript for that one.

When these words are uttered, Jesus has just begun his Sermon on the Mount. All preachers are told that they must seek to make an immediate impact on their listeners. If they fail to do so, they will have lost the attention of their audience from the very outset. Jesus could hardly have been more dramatic. He announces his squad, the disparate bunch of people from whom he will draw his team in the attack against hypocrisy, double standards, religious moralising and political compromise – all of which were rampant in the society of his day. Who was in the squad? Here's the unlikely list:

- the poor;
- those who mourn;
- the meek';
- those who hunger and thirst after righteousness;
- the merciful;
- the pure in heart;
- the peace-makers;
- those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

What a rag-bag of people! Human history show quite a different cast of eye-catchers, public figures, wheelers and dealers, power holders, people who make the world go round. Let me reproduce the list of those who've "made it", matching and contrasting the list I've just read out:

- the rich;
- the powerful;
- the assertive;
- those who hunger and thirst after total control;
- the hard-hearted;
- the corrupt;
- the warmongers;
- the persecutors.

Jesus spurns this list. He favours people who've been battered by life, people who've had to deal with "stuff", people who have somehow maintained their integrity and nobility of spirit against the odds, people who've known evil but have never been coloured by it, true people, honest people, good people. These are the *dramatis personae* in the great drama which Jesus unfolds.

And he tells them that they are to think of themselves as light and salt – elemental, universal, fundamental to human life.

Now this is where my sermon could have gone off the rails. There's so much I could say about the properties of light and salt. But if I were to do that, we'd be here all day; and I have a train to catch!

I want to focus down on what light and salt have in common; what it is that makes them such natural partners. And it's this. Neither salt nor light has much direct importance in and for itself. Its intrinsic value lies in what it adds to the lives we live.

This morning I put the electric light on and my day began. First thing this morning, I noticed that the days are getting longer – spring will soon be here and there'll be new life in our fields and gardens. My lovely anglepoise with its daylight bulb made it possible to write this sermon.

That's it! We don't sit and look at the light, gaze at the sun, examine the flame of a candle. Light creates conditions where meaning, intelligibility, purpose, understanding and activity can all come into being. Light makes it possible for things to happen.

It's in that sense that Jesus says we are to think of ourselves as light for the world.

I have worked out a compromise with Margaret my wife. She has tried to provide a salt-free diet for me over the years but I simply have to add salt to my potatoes or eggs (in any form) and salad. Salt is spread on the streets during freezing weather to stop us having accidents. Since the beginning of time, salt has been a preservative helping to maintain meat and other commodities for long periods of time.

We don't sit and look at salt, nor do we take a knife and fork to eat a plateful of salt, we don't admire its aesthetic qualities. Salt contributes to all kinds of necessary activities. *Sal sapit omnia* the motto of the Salters Livery Company. It means simply: "Salt savours everything".

It's in this sense that we are to consider ourselves as salt for the world.

From this brief comparison, we can readily see that we are not to think of ourselves primarily as recipients for life's good things. We are not centre-stage. We are not prima donnas. Ours is not, of necessity, a leading role. And yet, ours is a shaping and creative role. It is our task to create the conditions which allow good and sensible things to happen. Ours is a catalysing, enabling, facilitating role.

We need an army of people prepared to be good, to do the right thing, to bring a smile to people's faces, to help others carry their burdens, to make the world around us more enlightened, more savoury. We're to consider ourselves just ordinary folk, as doing as just doing ordinary things. We must think of ourselves as refusing to let the you-know-whats drag us down. And there was never a more important time for us to learn the beauty of ordinariness.

We went to see the new film "The Big Short" yesterday. It laid bare the downright greed and selfishness of people at the very heart of our financial life bringing down the pillars of the temple within which they went about their unholy business. They wreaked unemployment on tens of thousands. The cast untold numbers out of their homes. All for a paltry and stolen bounty.

Next week, we'll go to see another film: "Spotlight" which will lay bare the deep wickedness of the Roman Catholic Church in the archdiocese of Boston in the way its priests sexually abused large numbers of children (or else covered up these activities). What a world we live in. What have we come to? You can throw in the police, politicians, the worlds of athletics and tennis and football. They're all drug-ridden, greedy and grasping, corner-cutting, devious areas of activity. And it's into such a world that we have to pitch the beliefs we hold precious.

We may not dream up a mega solution to the world's problems. But we simply have to see ourselves as an army of people standing for good and righteous things in dark times. A new climate has to be created. A new culture has to be born. And we are people called to play our part in achieving these noble ends.

Let me end by telling you of an aspect of my domestic life that brings me pleasure. It's the verb "to soak". When Margaret and I are doing the dishes, I simply love it when she tells me that the casserole from which our main meal has come is in need of a good soak. My delight is simple. That means that I don't have to dry that particular dish. It's the same thing with a shirt which, because of my cack-handedness, ends up with dinner (or worse) red wine down its front. "I'll have to put that into soak," says Margaret. Soaking gets rid of stains and muck. It also (when it's called "marinading") brings new flavours into being. And our society needs a good soak at this moment. And we are the people to offer it to them.

When people come into this sanctuary, they're often heard to say: "Wow! This place is truly a holy place." And I put it down to the fact that the walls of this chapel have been soaked, marinated, in the prayer of countless generations down the centuries. They have absorbed the feeling, the openness to God, the outright demands or expressions of despair which people have uttered in this place. They have known the agony and the ecstasy, the joys and sorrows, the loves and hatreds, of all those people who've passed this way. You come in and you know you're in the house of God.

People who are light or salt are those who've been soaked in the Good News, marinated in the message of Jesus, coloured through and through by a need to live a new kind of life, aware of the power they've been given to do so. It's their calling, our calling, to add flavour to the life we find around us, to bring new understanding of how life might be lived. To do this, we'll use words only when necessary. It's when our lives are like salt and light, that we open the eyes, soften the hearts, warm the whole being of those we meet.

May God give us the strength to do these things.

Amen.