

*John Docherty, February 5, 2017*

### **Salt and / or light : what are we?**

Some Scripture texts are so familiar that it can be difficult to know how to read them without the reflex understanding that has been drilled in to us over time.

“You are the salt of the earth.”

“You are the light of the world.”

Those are pretty heavy words, carrying a pretty heavy weight of responsibility. As Christians, those words set us apart in ways that very little else does.

“**You** are the salt of the earth”, not anyone else.

“**You** are the light of the world”, not anyone else.

You've probably heard any number of sermons over the years that try to explain what those images convey. Such as, for example :

“Salt is a preservative, and the faithful followers of Jesus are what prevents God from wiping out humanity.”

“Salt is what we add to food to enhance its flavour, and we are here to give a foretaste of what it means to live full and abundant lives.”

“Light is the only thing that can conquer darkness, and we are here to bring that light, because we have special knowledge of God's will.”

“Light under a bushel is of no use to anybody, so we need to get out there and spread the light we have so that those who are in darkness can finally see the way forward.”

Implicit in all of these readings of what it means to be salt and light is the sense that we are essential to the well-being of this planet; of humanity.

We have a task before us, and we are the only ones who can carry out this task.

And, implicit in the notion of “task” is the notion of “action”. You don't accomplish a task by doing nothing. You accomplish a task by “doing”.

And yet, salt and light are not dynamic “doers”.

Salt preserves food, not by directly destroying bacteria that advance decay, but by absorbing water that the bacteria need to survive. The salt takes into itself the component of the environment that is necessary for bacterial decay to happen. I suppose there are some forms of mystical Christianity that might fit this approach : a theology of suffering that believes our personal suffering is somehow tied in to Jesus' suffering in order to bring salvation to the world.

Another version of that could be the Anabaptist notion of non-resistance. By refusing to respond to violence with violence, perhaps we are also absorbing into ourselves the component that is needed for violence to escalate.

The image of light is a little more nuanced. Light allows things to be seen, but it doesn't *change* what is seen.

Or does it?

If you leave something out in the sun long enough it will become bleached over time.

If you have pale Scottish skin, you know that the sun's light is powerfully at work; definitely painful if you spend more than just a few minutes exposed to it; and potentially dangerous; so you avoid it.

If you took a high school physics class, you might remember that light has properties that sometimes act like particles, sometimes like waves. It's a complicated thing.

When I was in grade five or six, I remember trying to get my head around how the light from the sun warmed the earth. I don't remember the specifics any more, but I came up with some kind of theory that involved sunspots, spatial ether, and the properties of the atmosphere. One of my classmates was sufficiently impressed by my brilliance that he was hopeful I'd make millions off this theory.

Turns out I was a little less brilliant than we thought.

Brilliant.

There's another word that echoes this notion of light. In French, la lumière “brille”. We find new information “illuminating”. Some of us are fortunate to have had “illustrious” careers.

These are all good things, and light, by definition, has no “dark” side.

And yet, to be told that you are the light of the world has its risks.

The simple fact of being told that you and your group, and not anyone else, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world is a formula for potential arrogance and disaster.

Because, frankly, we who are the light of the world do have our dark side. We cast our own shadow.

With every act that diminishes another, we diminish our own light.

With every position of wilful ignorance of the injustices of the world, we place a bushel over what light we have.

And, in case anyone thinks I'm moving this meditation in a particular direction, let me spell out what I'm *not* trying to say.

I'm not trying to say that we all need to be out there fixing everything we think is wrong with the world. And I'm not trying to suggest that I don't think we have good news to share.

Salt and light is not what we're called to do. It's what we're called to *be*.

I don't know if I'm a particularly good example of either salt *or* light. But I know what I'm not.

I'm not an activist.

I'm not an activist for gay rights, or indigenous rights, or refugee rights, or religious rights, or minority rights of various kinds.

Yes, I've made choices in life that have gotten me involved in various ways in some of those kinds of causes, and I've participated in the occasional protest, or demonstration, or vigil, but I'm not at my most comfortable in a crowd of people chanting slogans.

I'm not that kind of activist.

I know that that's largely a question of temperament.

I was at the gathering at the Park metro on Monday night with my family – Mary-Lou, Robert, Isaac, Elizabeth, Nathalie, Hayden and Elliott.

But frankly, I was very uncomfortable there, and had to leave before things formally wrapped up. I wasn't there to hear tirades against hate, or xenophobia, or a culture of exclusion, much as that may have been a very legitimate expression of how people were reacting to what happened at the mosque in Québec City on Sunday night.

I wasn't there to participate in what felt to me a bit like a pep rally.

I was there to express my own desire to reach out to those most affected by the killings. I was there to *be* there. And I was there to grieve. And I couldn't do that in that place, at that time.

I've said many times before that I'm also not a mystic. I've said that I don't seek, and don't particularly want, an ecstatic experience of God. And I know that that's also largely a question of temperament. I'm introverted enough already without being lost in spiritual contemplation. I don't have calloused knees from hours spent in prayer.

But I do engage in a mild form of the “practice of the presence of God”.

By that I mean that I *do* try to recognize that God is at work around me. My general attitude is that I think the way God is at work is not in intimate micromanagement of every aspect of daily life. If I can quote Rev. Charlie Andrews in the film 'Gandhi' : “I'm not so egotistical as to think He plans His day around my dilemmas.”

But there are moments when I pause, and catch my breath, and wonder just how much the 'coincidences' in life are more than they seem.

For some time now, I've been walking to work as a way of getting some exercise; of creating a buffer zone between home and work to help me think through some of the challenges I need to navigate; and as a way of managing some of the stress of a seven day work week.

Last Thursday, I had decided to take the car to come in to the office here because I was going to do some running around for both MFM and RIVO. But as I was putting on my coat, I made a last-minute decision to walk instead. The running around, I decided, could wait until Friday, when I would need the car for RIVO purposes anyway.

So I walked.

On the way, quite “by chance”, I crossed paths on a quiet side street with someone I hadn't seen for years; who doesn't live in Montreal anymore; who had a one-time connection to MFM; and who was clearly in distress, with tears in her eyes.

So I invited her for a coffee in a nearby café.

Among other things, she, too, was grieving what had happened in Québec City. Like many of us, she was not only grieving the lives that were lost but also struggling with what it means to be salt and light in a world that feels like it's getting worse, not better.

Her current pastor had suggested to her that recent events are signs that we are living in the end times, and that Jesus' return is imminent.

Her response to that, is that for the last two thousand years we've been living in the end times, and that we still need to know how to live our lives for possibly the next two thousand years. Whether we're out there trying to make a difference by getting involved in projects that improve peoples' lives in concrete ways, such as MCC might be trying to do;

or whether we're out there trying to make a difference by getting involved in projects that improve peoples' lives by introducing them to Jesus and bringing good news and hope, such as church planting endeavours might be trying to do;

whatever our approach, it can sometimes feel like it's one step forward and two steps backward.

So the question then becomes :

“Is the world in the state it's in because we're not salty enough?”

“Are we not zealous enough in our evangelism, or motivated enough in our work to challenge injustice?”

“Has our salt lost its saltiness because we've allowed it to become contaminated?”

“Are we not faithful enough?”

“Have we put our light under a bushel?”

Or worse, “Have we let our light go out because we've abandoned something essential in our faith?”

“You are the salt of the earth.”

“You are the light of the world.”

To repeat myself, those are weighty descriptions. And surely only saints of magnificent wisdom, courage and strength could merit such labels.

Certainly not me.

And, in my personal discouragement as I struggled with what it means to me personally to be salt and light, I came back to the text to try to find some comfort; some encouragement.

The latter part of the text on salt wasn't very helpful : "... if salt has lost its saltiness it is good for nothing and only fit to be thrown out and trampled under foot ..."

How's that for a motivator?

The latter part of the text on light was a little more helpful : "... let people see your good works, and glorify your father in heaven ..."

That at least allows me permission to try to do good works, however modest they may be.

But then I asked myself, "who are these saints of magnificent wisdom, courage and strength who *could* merit such labels?"

Who is the immediate audience of these words?

So I backed up a little bit to the beginning of the chapter, and then a little further back to the end of chapter four to see who he was addressing.

At the end of chapter four, we're told that "... his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan."

Then, in chapter 5, we get a glimpse of his audience. We have to read between the lines a little, but I think it's fair to assume that he knows his audience; he knows what they need to hear; and his message is intended to allow them to recognize themselves in his words.

So who *are* the people making up these great crowds?

They are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

They are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

They are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

They are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

They are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

They are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

They are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

They are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

They are those whom people revile and persecute and utter all kinds of evil against falsely on Jesus' account, for their reward is great in heaven.

They are you, and they are me : ordinary men and ordinary women with ordinary strengths and ordinary weaknesses.

And if I can get back to the 'light' metaphor for a moment, and stretch it just a little bit further, I think we who are the light of the world are not so much brilliant examples of unadulterated purity as we are the fragmented components of a white light that has been passed through the prism of humanity.

We're a rainbow of diversity that can only be perceived as white light to the extent that we can embrace each other and share our poverty of spirit;

to the extent that we can mourn together, and comfort each other;

to the extent that we can remain humble towards each other;

to the extent that we can hunger and thirst for righteousness;

to the extent that we can show each other mercy;

to the extent that we can be pure in heart;

to the extent that we can be peacemakers;

to the extent that we are willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

So ... what do you think?

Do we deserve to be called salt and light?