

I've always enjoyed finding out about the roots of words, where their origin comes from. And this week I learned something I didn't know before, the origin of the word salary. It goes back to a Latin root *sal*, which means salt. And it goes back to the time when Roman soldiers were paid in salt as part of their wages. That was a time when salt was known as white gold. And we need to bear that in mind, the value of salt, when considering the reading from the gospel that we've heard today, where Jesus calls his followers the salt of the earth.

Jesus' hearers would have been startled to be called such a thing because by doing so, Jesus was calling them precious. And we miss that point in our modern world, where salt is so cheap and so plentiful. The value of it passes us by, but the followers of Jesus, made up of the poor, the misfit and the outcast, they would have recognized straight away the one thing that Jesus is doing in this passage as he talked to them was giving them value. Jesus is saying to that ragtag bunch of followers he assembled during his ministry, that you who are not shiny, you who are not cleaned up, you who are rejected and have been wounded, forgotten, you are essential. You are worthwhile. You are treasured and I'm commissioning you to do a special work.

For those who've spent years trying to earn God's favor, believing that the more we try to be pious, the more we might be special in God's eyes, there's an important lesson we need to learn here. Jesus knowingly named a commodity that was valuable in his time and used it as a metaphor to describe his followers. And in so doing, he conferred value on those whom the world considered to be without value, people who might not have considered themselves to be valuable. And Jesus is still in the business of doing that today. We are all precious in his sight. Jesus is telling the people who they are. "You are the salt of the earth," he says. "Not, well, you're supposed to be the salt of the earth," or "When you become the salt of the earth." No, he says, "You are the salt of the earth." It's a description of our identity as followers of Jesus.

We are the salt of the earth. We are that which either enhances or embitters, soothes or irritates, melts or stings, preserves or ruins. For better or worse, we are the salt of the earth and what we do with our saltiness matters. And salt does its best work when it's poured out, when it dissolves into what's around it. If you're at dinner and somebody says, "Can you please pass the salt?" You'd be surprised if they took it, took the saltshaker and sort of made a pile on a different plate because salt is meant to be spread, to bring out flavor. Salt is no good when it's kept in the saltshaker. That's why Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth." Not you're the salt in your own home or even the salt in church. You're the salt of the earth. Salt isn't meant to cluster. It's meant to give of itself. It's meant to share its unique flavor, to bring out the best in its surroundings. If we want to enliven, enhance, deepen, or preserve the world, then we can't hide within the walls of our own churches.

And that message is reinforced by that powerful passage we had from the prophet Isaiah. And in that reading from the Hebrew scriptures, God speaks powerfully through his servant Isaiah, and he critiques the practice of fasting that the people were doing. The people of Israel had reduced fasting to private religious acts. They were sitting around in sackcloth and ashes. And God looks at them and says, "You call that a fast?" And he goes on to describe what he regards as a real fast. He says, "This is the fast I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry." That's the kind of fast that involves salt spreading.

As God's salt, we're not meant to cluster and congregate for our own comfort. We're not to retreat into pious little bubbles. Salt doesn't exist to preserve itself. It exists to preserve that which is not itself. And the saltiest part of our church community is our outreach committee, which is why I'll take any opportunity to promote their work and encourage others to get involved, because their work is outside of our parish. They are out there spreading salt.

In our home, Laura and I both like to cook, but only really one of us knows how to cook. So, I will choose a recipe, assemble the ingredients, do any chopping that's required, but at some point in the process I'll invariably call out to Laura and say, "How does this taste?" And she knows what to do. I don't. And normally what she does is add something and it's often salt. She knows how much salt to add, to take away the blandness of my cooking, but not to overwhelm it with a taste of salt. She's very good at getting the balance right. And as a church leader, I'm very aware of how hard it is at the moment to have that kind of balance in an unbalanced world. I've talked about how Isaiah encouraged us to pursue justice in the world, and I'm mindful that sometimes the church seems to reduce that gospel to mere activism. And similarly, at the other end of the political spectrum, we see the rise of Christian nationalism, which holds up Jesus as more of a mascot than a Messiah.

And we need to find balance. Like salt, we're to get out of the saltshaker, make a difference, but not to overpower or dominate. That's something I struggle with each week as I get up to preach. But actually, it's a question that each of us faces. How are we going to be the salt of the earth? That's each of our calling as followers of Jesus, to be salt. And salt at its best sustains and enriches life. Not enough to bask in our blessedness whilst all around us the world burns. We're the salt of the earth. May your pouring out, may my pouring out be for the life of the world. Amen.