

“STAYING SALTY (Mark 34)”
Mark 9:42-50

After the Christmas and New Year break, it's time to pick up again with the story of Jesus as Mark tells it in his gospel. For those of you who need reminding, or who have recently joined us here, or who are visiting this morning it might be worthwhile just summarising the story so far. Mark's story of Jesus' life and ministry is the most succinct of the four accounts we have in the Bible and is based on eyewitness reports, thought by most people to be provided by Peter, one of Jesus' inner circle of followers. There are plenty of references back to the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – and to Gentile people which lead us to think that the readership for which Mark intended his work included both Jews and non-Jews.

He doesn't begin with the birth of Jesus (as do Matthew and Luke), but launches straight into the ministry of Jesus with the description of his announcement that *“the time has come”* (1:15). The time that has come is the time for the *“good tidings”* of the Hebrew prophets to be made real, for their prophecies to be fulfilled. If you have ever taken the trouble to read any of the books of prophecy which come towards the end of the Old Testament, you'll know that those *“good tidings”* – which we might translate today as *“gospel”* – concerned the restoration and renewal of creation, a universal kingdom with everything just as God intended it to be. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos and the others looked forward to a time when God would send a Messiah figure to begin the process of restoring this world to the state God had intended it to be in before sin and evil subverted and distorted it in so many ways. It would be a kingdom in which there was no oppression, no injustice, no poverty or disease or violence or selfishness, in which the natural order of things was that of peace and harmony and wholeness – a state of affairs summed up in the Hebrew word *“shalom”*, which we tend to translate as simply *“peace”*.

Jesus had come to inaugurate that Kingdom – the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven – to herald a new epoch. The old order of things, the old agenda for life was now obsolete and Jesus came to offer a new agenda. His words in 1:15 can be interpreted as *“Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine”*. He invites trust and faith, in return for which we can find hope and healing and wholeness. As we've said, though, this new Kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus, but it was by no means fulfilled by him during his time on earth. That has yet to be, but throughout his life Jesus offered tantalising glimpses of what this new Kingdom might look like.

Of course, Jesus talked about it. He preached and debated and taught the principles of this Kingdom. He spoke with his close friends – the twelve men whom he selected to help him in his mission to proclaim the good news of this new approach to life. He spoke to crowds of people who followed him around, eager to hear more of what he had to offer, eager to see the ways in which he transformed people's lives, curious as to what this travelling preacher and healer had that the dozens of other travelling preachers and healers did not. He spoke with the keepers of the old traditions, the lawyers and Pharisees who believed that you could only approach God by keeping to scores, hundreds of rules and regulations which they themselves interpreted and applied and through which they managed to keep some kind of hold on power over the people. They wanted to see how Jesus fitted into their complex framework of doctrine and dogma – and if he didn't, then they could dismiss him as a charlatan, a blasphemer, a crook. Jesus drew attention again and again to the flawed logic of their position and offered them and their followers a new way to live, a new way to approach God which had at its heart freedom and hope.

But Jesus did not only talk. His method of proclaiming the advent of this new order was not simply to shout louder and louder until people got it. He demonstrated what it would be like by his life, by his actions and by the ways in which he transformed the lives of those who found themselves marginalised, brow-beaten, emptied of their humanity and their dignity. He healed those who suffered. He released those who found themselves oppressed by the forces of evil as he confronted those forces and drove out the demons. He restored a sense of dignity to those who had been pushed to the edge by the ignorance,

superstition and intolerance of others. He offered hope and wholeness to all those who were prepared to accept it.

And he showed no discrimination as to who could participate in this renewed kingdom. It was open to everyone – young and old, male and female, scholar and labourer, the theologically educated and the spiritually illiterate, the Jewish people and (most shocking of all) those who were Gentiles. He offered glimpses of this wonderful community which embraces all peoples and in which God's love is lavished on everyone. The time had indeed come when those words spoken by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and all the others centuries before was beginning to turn into reality.

But exactly halfway through Mark's story the mood begins to change. The offer which Jesus makes to all men and women, the invitation to trust him for his agenda, is indeed an inclusive one. It is open to anyone who wants to accept it. But those who take it seriously need to realise that it's going to be tough for a while. The forces of evil are still rampant and Jesus himself will feel their power as he succumbs to humiliation, suffering and death. (Of course, although he's been trying to tell his friends this, they can't really accept it yet.) There will be a need for self-sacrifice and self-discipline, even suffering and death on the part of his followers as the cosmic battle with evil is joined. There is no place for arrogance or self-satisfaction, no room for rivalry or resentment as those who want to be a part of this Kingdom pull together to continue the mission of Jesus. We've already seen how harsh Jesus can be with those who want to further their own ends – and in the next chapter we begin to see Jesus giving some specific instruction with regard to money, sex and power.

Those who choose the way of Jesus Christ bear a heavy responsibility to live as he wants them to. In the first part of the passage we've read this morning, he emphasises that those who are his followers should do nothing, by words or behaviour, to put others off the life of the Kingdom. Anyone who leads another down the path of sin, deserves to have a large millstone (this is the *mulov onikov*, the kind that was so big a donkey had to turn it) put round his neck as he's thrown into the sea. And Jesus uses a common kind of Jewish hyperbole to stress the need for personal holiness. Anything that gets in the way of following the path of discipleship is to be discarded – even a hand, a foot or an eye. (If you've seen that wonderful B-movie *The Man With X-Ray Eyes*, you'll remember the climax of the film is the main character gouging out his eyes at a tent meeting. And the early Church theologian, Origen, took this literally and castrated himself.)

It's strange that very few of those people who insist that we take the Bible literally seem to be missing body parts. Maybe they're all incredibly holy – or possibly just as selective in their interpretation of the Bible as the people they criticise! Anyway, the point Jesus is making so graphically here is that following him is to be an all-consuming passion and it is not an easy path to tread. As one commentator on these words writes (Craig Evans: *Word Biblical Commentary*): *“When it comes to giving advice, Jesus offers no platitudes. His teaching smacks of a grim realism that his disciples must take to heart. Following him is not easy ...”*

But those who do take up the challenge are people who have a distinctive contribution to make to the life of the community. They are people who stand out and who are themselves able to make a difference. The last comment of Jesus in this section drives home that point. Just as he does in the “Sermon On The Mount”, Jesus uses the image of salt to illustrate what he's saying. Those who follow him, who take up the challenge of living according to his way, who see the possibilities of this Kingdom life and want to offer glimpses of it in their own life, are to be like salt. And what you don't want to happen is for that salt to *“lose its saltiness”*.

As it happens, salt cannot lose its saltiness. Today's synthetic salt-substitutes can lose their taste after a while, but the real stuff cannot, apparently. It seems that what Jesus is talking about here is based very much on the kind of stuff used as salt by those who lived in that area in his day. Salt was derived from the waters of the Red Sea and the Dead Sea and what was shovelled up around the edge of those bodies of

water was a powdery substance that was very salty – it had a lot of salt in it. But, over time, the actual salt dissolved and what was left was the powdery deposit made up of all kinds of other things, which weren't salt, but looked very much like it. The followers of Jesus – you and I – are to be salt in our communities, in our neighbourhoods, our places of work, our families. And we are to try and ensure that we don't dissolve out of it, or lose our distinctiveness to such an extent that we end up making no difference at all. And there are three reasons why we are to act like salt where God has called us to be.

1. PRESERVATIVE

Today, with all our hi-tech processes for ensuring that food keeps fresh, we may well have lost sight of the main use to which salt was put in the time of Jesus. It was used as a preservative. Rubbed into meat and other foodstuffs it would enable them to be kept for much longer and would prevent the food going off for quite a while. Of course, there were other ways of achieving that – smoking, drying, pickling and so on – but salt was the main method.

In a world which can so easily go rotten, the followers of Jesus are called to act as a kind of preservative, a vital ingredient that stops things getting any more rotten. You and I are called by Jesus Christ to live lives which uphold the moral and ethical standards of the Kingdom of God. We are called to demonstrate values and attitudes which witness to the transforming power of God. It is so easy to get carried along with the flow that we end up capitulating to the values of the society around us in ways which are unhelpful to us and which contribute to the general decline of society.

Jesus mentions the specific attitude of “*being at peace with one another*” as one way of showing that we are “salty”. In a world in which competition, rivalry, gossip, duplicity and corruption are almost endemic, we are called to a lifestyle that involves compassion and sharing, looking out for one another's interests rather than our own, building up friendship and fellowship rather than going down the path of individualism and selfishness. It is as we hold on to the values of the Kingdom of God that we show ourselves to be distinctive and that we contribute to the overall good of society.

That is not to say, of course, that everyone else in our community is rotten to the core (rather a foolish thing to say with our civic leaders here this morning!), but it is important to insist on the positive contribution the followers of Christ are challenged to make to this world. And that's perhaps apparent in our second point.

2. TASTE

The reason we use salt today, as we have said, is not primarily as a preservative. Our primary reason today is probably the secondary reason it was used in Jesus' day – taste. Salt adds an extra “something” to the mix. There are those who can't take a lot of salt – and others who pile it on like it's going out of fashion – but we all miss it if it's not there, don't we? Fish and chips without salt and vinegar taste OK, but it's not the same as with it. If you miss it out of the bread mix or the mashed potato, you know all about it.

The followers of Jesus Christ add that extra “something” to the community. I would hesitate to say that they actually give it more taste, but there is certainly a positive contribution that can be made – a contribution that the community would be the poorer without. As I've said, probably the majority of people in a community such as this seek its common good and adhere to an ethic that is more or less based on the ethic of Jesus. Someone I was speaking to this week said that, although he didn't believe in God, he tried to adhere to the ethic of Jesus Christ. (Fair enough – but there are a few philosophical and theological issues to grapple with there!) But imagine what this community would be like without any

kind of Christian witness – no churches, no Christian rites of passage or rituals, no Christian festivals. It would still function, probably, but that extra “something” would not be there.

You and I, if we call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ, are to express our faith in and loyalty to him in the attitudes of self-sacrifice, restraint, unconditional love and compassion which are the hallmarks of the life of Jesus Christ himself. We are not “saved” or “converted” or whatever word you want to use as something that is very individual – a kind of personal insurance policy to guard against going to hell. We accept the call to follow the way of Jesus Christ, to model the values of the Kingdom in order to make a positive difference here and now, to make a distinctive contribution of integrity, honesty and holiness in the places where we are called to live and work, to offer glimpses of the Kingdom which will have an impact on the lives of others.

3. **THIRST**

And if we do that consistently and attractively – after all, you can be distinctive and highly **un**attractive! – then a third quality of salt comes into play. Salt preserves and adds taste, but it can also create a thirst. If the followers of Jesus Christ are serious about the way in which they model the Kingdom values of liberty, integrity and holiness, then others may well see it and want to try it for themselves. It’s all very well talking about our call to witness to Jesus Christ, to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God, but if the words of proclamation are spoken by people with such sad lives, with such care-worn faces, with such resentful and bitter attitudes, then they will certainly fall on stony ground.

Jesus came to offer “*life in all its fullness*” according to *John 10:10*. He came to lighten our burdens not add to them. So often the way the followers of Jesus Christ live their lives and the ways in which they express the awesome good news of the Kingdom of God are so much at odds with the message itself that there is little wonder why other people are not impressed. One of the phrases that is used in the new vision statement of the United Reformed Church nationally is “*excited by the gospel*”. Are you excited by it? Does following Jesus fill you with enthusiasm – challenging and uncomfortable as it might sometimes be? Does your encounter with Jesus Christ mean that you are able to live your life with an authenticity and integrity and sheer, unabashed joy which attracts others? Would people say to you, in the words of the song by *The Electrics*, “*I don’t know what you’re drinking, but pour me a pint as well*”?

You see, if we are not careful – careful to keep reading the words of Jesus and the rest of God’s word in the Bible, careful to keep praying with and for one another, careful to support and encourage one another, careful to remind ourselves of what this Kingdom life is all about – then we will lose that saltiness which enables us to make a distinctive contribution to the life of this community and to make a difference in this world. We must not let the constant creep of the attitudes of this world erode away, dissolve the saltiness that makes us what we are called to be – followers of Jesus Christ, Kingdom people. And in chapter 10, Jesus gives some specific advice on that score. But more of that another time.

Questions for discussion

1. Who do you think the “*little ones*” are in *v42*?
2. Do you think *vv43-47* are to be taken literally? If not, how would you sum up what is being said? (If you do, how come you still have all your limbs?!)
3. In what ways can Christians act as a preservative in society?
4. Suggest some of the distinctive contributions that Christians can make to the community. How many of them are you/your church making?

5. In what ways can we show that we are “*excited by the gospel*”? How might that attract other people to the way of Jesus Christ?
6. What one new thing have you learned from this passage?