Salting the earth and lighting the world

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Better to light a candle
than curse the darkness

Detail from *The Sermon on the Mount* by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933)

Understanding how Christians are constituted as salt and light

During the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ stated to his followers, *"you are the salt of the earth"* and *"the light of the world"*. Thus he declared a profound indicative *"you are"* (not you will, should or could be) and a stirring imperative *"let your light shine"* while also warning about the indictment of any who hide the light under a bowl, or let the salt lose flavour (Matthew 5:13-16):

> *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven".*

In his challenging sermon, our Lord told the disciples they are constituted as *"the light of the world"* and *"the salt of the earth"*. Serving accordingly does not arise as specialised action, nor should it be something to which Christians may aspire. It is who we are in him! But it does require ambition for God's glory.

Proud people whose good works are *done before men, to be seen by them*, must learn: *"do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"* (6:1-3). Such people must realise that: *"whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"* (23:12). The humble will be lifted up, so their good work done in public may exalt God. Thus we serve with savour as the salt of the earth, reflecting the brightness of Christ as the sons of light, so all humanity will glorify our Lord, the light of the world - whose kingship that we receive as co-heirs with him, is established forever by a covenant of salt.

Influencing with savour - as the salt of the earth

Since the followers of Christ are constituted in him with salty characteristics, it is crucial that we understand the value, application and efficacy of salt:

- Salt **penetrates** to bring **cleansing**, when utilised to scour and bleach;
- While it stings when applied, salt solution assists the **healing** of wounds;
- Even in the era of refrigeration, salting is a means of food **preservation**;
- Salt brings **flavour** to *tasteless food* like *the white of an egg* (Job 6:6-7);
- Salt links to **judgement**: Lot's wife *became a pillar of salt* (Genesis 19:26); God stated, *"Put salt on Moab, for she will be laid waste"* (Jeremiah 48:9); and as Jesus declared, *"Everyone will be salted with fire"* (Mark 9:49).
- Without salt we become sick and die, hence salt gives **life** to the world!

Pliny the Elder, writing in the First Century AD, (*Natural History* 31:41) said: *Even in the very honours, too, that are bestowed upon successful warfare, salt plays its part, and from it, our word "salarium" is derived.* Hence the view that the Latin *salarium* ('salary') comes from *salis* ('salt'), which was so valuable as to form part of the Roman soldiers' remuneration ('salt money').

Moreover, the servants of King Artaxerxes, *under obligation to the palace*, (Ezra 4:14), refer to themselves literally as 'salted with the salt of the palace'.

As we are the salt of the earth, our great opportunity is to let the valued qualities of salt enrich our words and actions, as Jesus (echoed by Paul) encouraged:

> *Have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other* (Mark 9:50);
>
> *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone* (Colossians 4:6).

Further, God required incense that was *salted and pure* (Exodus 30:35) and he stated: *Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings* (Leviticus 2:13).

As priests, sustained under *an everlasting covenant of salt* (Numbers 18:19), may we testify to Christ with salty authenticity, so people may appreciate him as *the bread of life* (John 6:35) when they *taste and see that the LORD is good* (Psalm 34:8). May Christian believers offer themselves in authentically salty priestly ministry, *as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God* (Romans 12:1).

Shining brightly as the light of the world

As God's people comprehend the virtuous characteristics of light, shown by Jesus Christ, we become better able to apply such features in ministry: the light of Christ enables humanity to see the path of right living and to be warned that *the fruitless deeds of darkness* must be *exposed by the light* so they become visible (Ephesians 5:11-13). That ministry of Christ is founded on Scripture:

- *The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?* (Psalm 27:1);
- *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path* (Psalm 119:105);
- *... the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn* (Isaiah 60:2-3).

It is written concerning our Lord Jesus: *In him was life, and that life was the light of all men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it* (John 1:4-5). Indeed, he said of himself in the temple, that was aglow during Hanukkah (the Festival of Lights), *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12). So may we minister with that same brightness and effect!

Jesus Christ is *the true light that gives light to every man* (1:9), so we may become the *"sons of light"* (12:36). Therefore, all who see our life and work will see his light, of which we are sons, who are warned about the darkness:

> *"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"* (Matthew 6:22-23).

But as Jesus taught, we are to shine the light of God openly (Luke 8:16-18):

> *"... No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open".*

So we see Christ shining light upon the Rich Young Ruler, sending him away to ponder the error of materialism, but with magnanimity that could be seen in his gaze. So we read: *Jesus looked at him and loved him* (Mark 10:21). May the light of Christ shine in our eyes with love even as we expose errors! Like the Greeks who addressed Philip, saying: *"we would like to see Jesus"* (John 12:21), may we see him in his fulness, so others will see him in us.

Serving Christ the light of the world who is king by a covenant of salt

Since Almighty God has *raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms* (Ephesians 2:6) as *co-heirs with Christ* (Romans 8:17), we inherit all the fullness, authority, mission and power of him who stated: *"While I am in the world I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12). Hence, we are constituted in him to shine with splendour. And because *the God of Israel has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt* (II Chronicles 13:5), we are to minister as those who belong to David's Son, whose rule is founded with every good salty quality.

Since the virtue of salt characterises the covenant by which Christ's kingship as Davidic Messiah is established, it should be seen in growing measure among we who as co-heirs are the descendants of David. And the virtues of light that are found in Christ should similarly be seen in growing measure among his people.

The foundation of Christ's influence as salt, and our consequent ministry, is the covenant of salt he inherits and bequeaths. The basis of Christ's work as light, and our subsequent role, is that *God is light* (I John 1:5) whose *splendour was like the sunrise*, with rays which *flashed from his hand* ... (Habakkuk 3:4).

Ministering practically as salt and light

Speaking words seasoned with salt, Jesus rescued the adulterous woman by his ruling: *"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone"* (John 8:7). Yet with the light of truth, he said: *"leave your life of sin"* (8:11). Knowing our identity in Christ, our salty ministry penetrates to bring cleansing, healing, preservation, flavour, judgement and life! Like him, we shine the light that exposes the deeds of darkness and illuminates the path of righteousness.

An example of speech seasoned by salt, with action to shine the light of truth, occurred in 1891 as the Salvation Army transformed the UK match industry in which many workers died from white and yellow phosphorus poisoning. Since the government would not respond, the Salvation Army started a match factory using less toxic red phosphorus. Speaking to shine 'Lights in Darkest England', the Salvation Army persuaded people to buy only the safely-made matches and thus they reformed the entire industry, saving countless workers from death!

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