

## The everyday stuff of healing and wholeness

"If your church were a local eating place, which one would it be?" I've often started away-days I've led for parish groups with that question. Or something similar: "suppose your church were a radio station, or a newspaper, or an animal – which one would it be?" I've found that this is a good way to get people who want to see their church develop and grow to use their imagination to reflect on its life. The answers are quite revealing. They show how they see their church, what they think it's for, what kind of impression they think it makes on others.

Suppose we asked ourselves the same questions. "If our cathedral community were a local eating place, or a radio station, or a newspaper, or an animal, which one would it be?" Something to talk about over coffee afterwards.

Jesus was fond of exercising imagination. That's why he told so many stories. So I wonder what would happen if we put this question to him: "Jesus, if you saw your followers as ordinary household items, which ones would they be?" What do you think would Jesus say? The answer is there in today's gospel. "You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world" (Matt 5.13, 14).

'Salt of the earth'. We think of salt in cooking, flavouring the soup or the stew. 'She's the salt of the earth', we say, taking the flavouring image further. 'A good person, who brings out the best in others'. But I'm not sure that's what Jesus meant. 'The earth' was a family's earth oven, which was heated by a readily available solid fuel: manure from their animals. To make it burn better, salt was mixed into the manure. And when the salt was exhausted, the manure hardened. It was then used as a kind of paving stone and "trampled under foot". Nothing was wasted in Jesus' world.

"You are the salt of the earth", covered in animal waste, immersed in whatever it is that fuels the life of the household, the community. "St Edmundsbury Cathedral, you are the salt of the earth". When we hear Jesus saying this, I wonder what we imagine he's calling us to become.

"You are the light of the world" too. Let's remind ourselves of what Jesus goes on to say about this light. "A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No-one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lamp stand. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5.14-16). I don't think Jesus is bothered so much about what kind of light we are. He's more interested in the direction in which our light shines: outwards, to illuminate the house or the night sky.

Imagine driving along the A14 at night. Going west, you see the lights of Newmarket, then Cambridge. Going east, Stowmarket then Ipswich, then Felixstowe. You can't miss the light from these towns and cities. If they're too bright we call it 'light pollution'. But travel along a Suffolk country road after dark, and the light from even a small village is reassuring. It helps you to know where you are.

“Let your light shine outwards, into the wider world”, says Jesus, “where it will illuminate the generosity and grace of God”.

Jesus, if you saw this Cathedral community as everyday household stuff, what would we be? “You are the salt that gets mixed into manure, so that it burns better. The light that illuminates the whole house, the whole world”.

I wonder what Jesus is saying to our imagination this morning through the stuff of salt and light. As you know, this month we’ve started to raise the profile of our Cathedral as a community of healing and wholeness. At this service every Sunday there will be an opportunity to be anointed with oil and receive the laying on of hands with prayer in the Lady Chapel during communion. How do salt and light speak to us as we take these important steps? Here’s a story that might help.

It’s about a small Christian community in Paris started by a writer and lecturer called Madeleine Delbrel. Until she was 20, she called herself an atheist. In that year (1924) her fiancé – also an atheist – shocked her by breaking off their engagement and joining a religious order. As a result she found herself returning to ‘the God question’. “I decided to pray”, she said. “By reading and reflecting I found God; but by praying, I believed that God found me, and that he is a living reality, and that we can love God in the way that we love a person”.

In 1933 Madeleine and two friends started to share a house in the Paris suburb of Ivry-sur-Seine, which at the time was a hotbed of communism. They committed themselves to a life of simplicity, chastity and evangelism. Their plan was to love their neighbours by opening their home as a place of hospitality, where anyone from any background would be welcomed and accepted. Madeleine called it “a tiny cell of the Church, born in our time, making its home in our time”.

I was touched by the way she described their home: “There are some people whom God takes and sets apart. There are others he leaves among the crowd. ... They love the door that opens onto the street. ... We, the ordinary people of the street, believe with all our might that this street, this world, where God has placed us, is our place of holiness”.

I’m sure Jesus would have seen Madeleine’s community of faith and love and hospitality and evangelism as “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”. Because “salt of the earth” is a picture of love that is immersed, engaged, absorbed yet never finished. And “light of the world” illuminates its surroundings with the grace and generosity of God.

Of course we are not Madeleine’s ‘tiny cell of the Church’. But we can let the story she tells get to work on our imagination and prayer. You’ll know that as a Cathedral community we are moving towards becoming ‘Dementia Friendly’. Following on from the meeting here last September, some of us are planning to go to a day conference at Walsingham in June (see Pam Pitts if you want to know more).

Being 'Dementia Friendly' is part of what it means to be a community where Christ-like love is like salt that is immersed, engaged, absorbed yet never finished; like light that floods the world with God's acceptance and welcome. Becoming 'Dementia Friendly' makes me wonder how else we might fulfil our calling to be salt and light. 'Migrant Friendly'. 'Teenager Friendly'. 'Homeless Friendly'. The list is endless.

When we come to this Eucharist on Sundays, we might find ourselves drawn into the Lady Chapel during communion, caught up in active prayer symbolised by ordinary household things like olive oil and the touch of hands. For some of us, the desire for healing and wholeness will be about coming to terms with this or that; making sense of what's going on in our lives; learning to forgive or be forgiven. And as a Cathedral community, healing and wholeness will be about making places of faith and love and hospitality and evangelism. And receiving strength to make a difference to "this street, this world, where God has placed us ... *our* place of holiness".

Today in the gospel Jesus calls us to see our Cathedral community as ordinary household items. "The salt of the earth, the light of the world". The everyday stuff of healing and wholeness that brings glory to God. Amen.

*Canon Dr John Parr, February 9<sup>th</sup> 2020*