

Let your light shine

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[0 : 00] It was pretty awful in places and yet Meg and I couldn't stop watching.! I'm talking about The X Factor, Saturday nights at 8pm on Terrestrial TV.

! Have you ever seen those? The X Factor, The Voice, American Idol, they're all kind of the same. It's a singing contest. It's open to anyone. There's four judges. You come on stage, have a go, and you get a yes or a no. Win the whole thing and you'll get a recording contract and maybe number one in the charts.

I've got to say, The X Factor was awful. Some terrible, deluded singers encouraged to perform so they could be laughed at. And yet at the same time, some really emotional moments.

Janet Devlin was a 16 year old girl from Northern Ireland. She'd never sung in public before. She was painfully shy and quiet as she came on stage, all nerves and arms crossed.

Three minutes later, and she chokes in disbelief as she hears the judges' words, You're a star. This is what you're born to do.

[1 : 14] And you see her, Janet Devlin, relax and breathe and smile and stand up and cry all at the same time.

There's something so raw and gripping about that. A voice from outside that declares, This is who you are. This is what you're born to do.

Go on out there and light up the world. We're in the early stages of the Sermon on the Mount this morning. We're in Galilee, a northern backwater in Israel, in a corner of the Roman Empire at the start of the first century.

And a man has turned up on the scene saying, The kingdom of heaven has come near. He's taught, attracted a crowd and healed their diseases. And at the start of chapter five, Jesus retreats up a mountain and his disciples come to him.

There's only four named disciples so far. Simon and Andrew and James and John, fisherman. And they sit round him in the dirt and he speaks.

[2 : 20] So picture, I think, a little gang of men, maybe some others too, gathered around Jesus, his first followers. And further out beyond, maybe a crowd milling around and listening in.

And to this handful of fishermen in Nowheresville, 2000 years ago, Jesus declares, verse 13, You are the salt of the earth.

You. You are the light of the world. You. This is who you are. This is what I'm calling you to be. Go out there and light up the world.

Which is pretty bold, isn't it? What did the disciples make of it? Or imagine the crowd listening in on the edges. Did they smirk and roll their eyes?

Another world changing speech. The revolution starts with you. Blah, blah, blah. Jesus is talking here to the very first few Christian disciples.

[3 : 25] And yet what he says to them then, he continues to say to everyone now who comes and follows Jesus Christ. So if you're here in church this morning and you feel you're like one of the crowd listening in on the edges, then listen.

And if you're a disciple, a part of this little church, St. John's in the back end of Nowheresville, hear this. You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world. So let your light shine. Let's explore this together this morning then. Who we are and what we're here to do.

Describe someone today as salt of the earth. And I think you kind of mean someone reliable and solid. I imagine a steady man's man in his early sixties.

The kind of man I'd like to be. Weathered skin, practical, straight talking, can do your DIY for you and your wallpapering. He's salt of the earth, he is. In Bible times like today, salt is used for

flavouring.

[4 : 32] You stick it on your oven chips. It's got bite and taste. Salt, especially back then, is a preservative. There's no fridge freezers in the first century.

If you didn't want your meat to rot and decay, rub salt in it like biltong and you'll stop the rot. You'll preserve it. Salt is used for all sorts, to be honest. But what is Jesus saying here?

Well, the first thing about salt and light is it speaks of being distinct and different.

Verse 13. You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, that is, it's become tasteless. How can it be made salty again?

It's no longer good for anything. See, good salt tastes. You notice it on your chips. It's distinct. It's different. It stands out. Just like light does.

[5 : 28] Verse 14. Or a town built on a hill. Imagine you're out in the countryside on a cloudy first century night and the darkness has set in.

The zero light pollution. You find yourself standing in inky blackness. Can't see your hand in front of your face. You stumble along a track, feel your way around a corner, and suddenly there in the distance is Jerusalem.

The city set on a hill and radiating from it a glow of light. Black darkness, blazing light. Salt and light then distinct, different, standing out.

Jesus talks here in these verses about you, salty disciples, and the earth. You, light people, and the world. Further on in verse 16, just a touch further down.

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Disciples of Jesus then are made distinct and set apart from the world around them.

[6 : 43] Notice Jesus says, this is who you are. Not, please try your hardest to be salty, give it a go. No, no. Salt and light is your God-given identity.

What God's made you. So then, Jesus looks out on humanity and sees two distinct groups. Those who surround him, his disciples who belong in the kingdom and have God as their Father.

They are salt and light. And then there are the others. The world. That's the first thing here. We should say, by the way, this dividing of humanity in two.

Disciples of Jesus, children of God, and then the world. And then you're one or the other. It shouldn't, it couldn't, mustn't breed a we're better attitude among Christians.

Sometimes that does happen, you know. But for Christians to stand tall and despise the world out there, so wrong. For sure, when you turn to Jesus, you receive wonderful blessings.

[7 : 53] Yours is the kingdom of heaven. You will see God. You will be called children of God. But none of that is well done me. And now I look down on outsiders.

See, I'm just as weak and selfish and unworthy of God's blessing as everyone I meet on the street and at work and in class.

I'm no different. It's just that by God's kindness, I've experienced his grace in my life. And yet I, we, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Followers of Jesus made distinct from the world. But for what? If we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, what are we here for?

I'm on the flow diagram on the handout, if you can see it. We've been made distinct from the world. Why? Answer. To do good in the world. We've been made the salt of the earth.

[9 : 04] We've been made the light of the world. Salt and light with respect to and for the world. Which means what?

Some people say, listen, salt preserves things. Society is decaying and rotten and Christians can stop the rot. Whereas light lights up the darkness.

And so we've got to promote the spread of truth and beauty and goodness. Maybe that's it. I'm not sure it's as clear cut as that. I think the point is, salt and light are undeniably good.

Salty, tasty salt in verse 13 is good and useful. Till it uses its saltiness and it's no good for anything. When you're standing in inky blackness and can't find your way, the light of a town on a hill is good.

And in verse 16, Jesus says, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds. [10 : 09] Jesus' purpose then for his disciples to be in our neighborhoods and the workplace and the home and at school and out with friends.

And our purpose to live salty and bright lives and do good. Do good like what?

Well, the whole of the Sermon on the Mount these next weeks starts to flesh out the kind of God pleasing, salty, bright living that is so good.

So let me ask a question. I wonder where you'll be and what you'll be doing this time tomorrow. Maybe set your alarm on your mobile phone for 20 past 11 and when it goes off say, What does Jesus Christ want of me right here and now, 20 past 11 Monday morning?

Answer, to do God's will as his child and be salt and light. Just from the Sermon on the Mount, these few chapters.

[11:16] Don't insist on your rights, but let others go before you. Show a deeply patient kindness to those around you.

Rather than treating other people as sex objects, treat people as people. Refuse to take revenge. There's a person in your class at school who hates you. Love them and pray for them. Forgive those who do you wrong because you've been forgiven.

Tomorrow morning at 20 past 11, refuse to worry about all the stresses coming your way because you know your father's in charge.

And at 20 past 11 tomorrow morning, rather than judging the person in front of you and magnifying their faults, think rightly about your own life and faults.

[12:14] In a workplace of self-promotion, anxiety, grudge, instant judgment of others. Live differently. Live the beautiful way. Live Jesus's way.

Salty, bright, distinctive living for him. It could be maybe that this salty living might mean something very particular.

Just this coming week. It's the Queen's funeral tomorrow morning. And over this past week, do you agree? It feels as though the Queen's death has affected lots of people.

Unearthing memories of loved ones. Bringing past grief to the surface. Making some think a bit more about dying. Maybe we feel vulnerable as a nation, personally.

As those whom Jesus commands to mourn with those who mourn. What a moment to do good with those around us.

[13:23] And simply to ask someone, how has the Queen's death affected you? And then listen genuinely and understand. And if appropriate, share something of your own sorrows.

And why Jesus is so important to you. You do that? You'd be salt and light. You'd be letting your light shine.

Because do you see how Jesus puts it in verse 16? Just come back to the text. Let your light shine before others. That they may see your good deeds. I've laboured this a bit.

Those who come to Jesus Christ, his disciples. We are salt and light. And Jesus wants us to do good deeds in the world. Just pause and reflect a moment.

I wonder how this strikes you. Ask me what being a Christian is about. What St John's Orchard Park is for. Lots of things will spring to mind. We're about knowing God.

[14:28] Well, that's right. We're about meeting and listening to God's word. And helping each other keep going and keep growing in our faith. That's right, too.

There is more to say. You're the light of the world, Jesus says. That's your identity. If I can put it like this.

We exist for this estate. Our street. Our office. And Jesus really wants to press this on us.

Hence the kind of comedy stuff in verses 14 and 15. Not laugh out loud, but you'll see what I mean.

Look. You are the light of the world. A town built 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. We get that, don't we?

[15:27] When I was 16 years old, I was at school in South Wales. Atlantic College was on the coastline between Cardiff and Bridge End. And a two mile run west along the cliffs was the Nash Point Lighthouse and Foghorn.

Most of the year, to be honest, it felt like dark cloud, fog and horizontal rain would slice in off the Atlantic. The joy of South Wales. Pretty brutal tides too.

And a rocky headland. And you see why they built a lighthouse there. The Nash Point Lighthouse is 40 metres high. It shines for 21 nautical miles. A lifesaver. Imagine I took a run up there one November evening and as I pass by, I see the lighthouse keeper leaning out at the top and putting enormous wooden boards around the top, surrounding the lamp.

I'm a bit confused. And I shout up to him in my best English accent. Oi, what are you doing? And he shouts down. I don't want to do the accent.

He shouts down. Listen, new directive from Lighthouse HQ. We've got to keep the light in from now on. It's a stupid thing to imagine, isn't it?

[16:41] The purpose of the Nash Point Lighthouse is to shine out into the world so that others see. The purpose of a Christian community is to shine out into the world so that others see.

That is why Jesus is so full of challenge here. Saying, don't blend in. Don't hide away. First off, don't blend in.

That's the salt stuff. Here, you are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

So question. In your class at school, for example, will people know that you follow Jesus?

Will you be distinct and different? Will you stand out and be salty? Not because you wear a badge saying, I love Jesus. I go to the Christian union. But will they taste something as they relate to you?

[17:52] Will you so live to please your heavenly Father that you stand out from the crowd? You don't care so much what others think of you.

You get to know the person everyone else avoids. You speak kind words. You refuse to fight back. You stand up for Jesus and his teaching.

Maybe you'll get singled out for that if you live like that. But you won't be blending in. Because blending in is no good for anything.

Jesus says don't blend in. Jesus says alongside that, don't hide away, but shine. Because the point is, you really don't put wooden boards around a lighthouse lamp.

You really don't light a lamp and put it under a bowl. You stick it on a stand and it gives light to everyone. I wonder if it's possible, actually, for some of us to have a very active church life.

[19:00] Attending and helping and serving and meeting one another and WhatsApp in prayer requests and so on. All good. A bunch of lamps in a lamp shop talking about being good lamps.

And yet I live under a bowl, if I can put it like this. And my neighbours don't even know me. And my colleagues might not even know I'm a Christian.

Is that possible? Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, quote, Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him. Oh. Jesus is saying here, let your light shine.

And you've got to come to him, the light of the world. Turn to him. Have him as your Lord and Saviour. And then throw yourself into doing good deeds in the world as you obey Jesus' teaching.

[20:05] So that... Well, there is a final step. There's a goal. In these verses here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' aim is not just that we please God and do good deeds and that's it.

Notice, lastly this morning, how verse 16 ends. Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

You see, this is the end goal. Jesus' end goal is that through Christians' salty, bright lives in the world, this estate and our neighbourhoods and our friends will see and taste that God is good.

That the world will taste and see something in Jesus' disciples so unsettling and attractive and good that they find themselves drawn to churches and drawn to Jesus to listen to his words.

And then to choose themselves to become his disciples and live for God's glory. Do you see the steps?

[21:27] Isn't this remarkable? God's plan, his eternal plan for the spreading of his kingdom, to use the lives of his followers as a shining display that attracts people to our Father in heaven.

God's plan. And that's Matthew 5 this morning, rammed into verses 13 to 16. So significant. What a privilege. You are the light of the world.

What a challenge. Don't blend in or hide away. Let your light shine. What a goal that others will see and give glory to God.

You know, the X Factor is awful. But it's spiked with such moments. This is who you are.

This is what you're born to do. Go out there and light up the world. And yet, two or three years down the line, those light up the world singers are mostly forgotten.

[22:33] Who's heard of Janet Devlin? Beautiful moments, but they don't last. Do you wonder as you read Matthew 5 what the first few disciples in the first century made of Jesus' teaching as they sat around him on the mountain?

Can you imagine what they thought as they looked around at each other? This handful of fishermen in no words, Bill. You are the light of the world. Really? Us?

You are the light of the earth. Yet, fast forward twenty centuries to today and, from that tiny beginning, now millions, if not billions of people around the world, who from that small beginning have tasted the good deeds of Christian disciples and come themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, And are now living salty, bright lives in the darkness.

Disciples of Jesus changing the world? You bet they have. Go to Africa and Asia, even Europe and America and discover Christian communities.

Who are doing what these first disciples were commanded to. Changing the world? They are. And they will. Because that is God's plan.

[23 : 53] For how his name will be hallowed and his kingdom come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. Here's the question as we finish.

This autumn, will we join in? Confessing how readily we blend in and hide away.

Because we do, don't we? Confessing that to our Lord. And then drawing fresh mercy from the Lord Jesus who died for us. Will we give ourselves in this little corner of the world to being who we are?

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. Let me lead us in a prayer.

Let's pray together. Our Lord and our Father, we praise you this morning for the words of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 57] Thank you that in your great mercy, by such great grace, you draw us to yourself. You make us members of the kingdom of your Son.

May we hear your voice this morning.

Would you help us as those who belong to Jesus Christ to live salty, bright, beautifully distinctive lives in this estate and in our neighbourhoods and beyond.

And we pray that such that men and women and boys and girls all around this part of your world might be drawn to you, your Son and his teaching.

That they might in turn glorify you as their Father in heaven, such that all glory might come to you. We pray in Jesus' name.

[26 : 13] Amen.