

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 6 FEBRUARY 2011

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Matthew 5: 13-16; Psalm 112: 1-6

“A Tasty Covenant”

On the very hot days we had in the past week our dog Charlie went absolutely crazy trying to lick our legs and our feet. Every opportunity she got, she would be frantically trying to lick us. We were equally frantic, trying to discourage her from tripping us up. Every visitor that entered the house was welcomed with enthusiastic licking if she could get away with it, feet, legs and, if someone would let her, the inside of their hands.

As we did, she also, drank a lot of water to keep herself hydrated and we had to fill her bowl several times a day. The rest of the day she would find the coolest corner of the house and lay there, panting her heart out.

Dogs know instinctively what is good for them. You don't have to tell them to find a spot in the shade, or to drink more water than usual when the temperature rises to uncomfortable levels. And you don't have to tell them they need salt to keep the precarious balance of fluids and minerals in their bodies stable.

We filled her waterbowl, but we didn't give her extra salt. And that is why she licked us with so much enthusiasm: Not because she suddenly loved us more than before, but because she knew the sweat on our skin contained the salt she needed to keep herself healthy.

She kept really well in the heat and was as energetic as she always is by late afternoon when we go for a run in the park. We on the other hand felt drained and really struggled to balance water intake with enough sugar and salt to help our bodies absorb that water. We tried to stay cool, but instead of spending the hottest part of the day laying down, we tried (in vain!) to keep going, with the help of air conditioners and fans. Getting headaches by moving between hot and cold too often.

It's funny isn't it, how we, humans, need to think about these things, rationalise them, and even then get them wrong sometimes, resulting in tiredness, dizziness, headaches, and for some of us even nausea. While dogs only follow their instincts to get it right.

That salt is fundamental for our well being is something we, as twenty-first century people, hardly know or notice. We hardly need to add salt to our modern diets because usually there is more than enough salt there already, actually far too much salt, from the processed items we use to prepare them. It's only when temperatures rise that we notice that we need salt to keep the balance of fluids and minerals in our body right.

In ancient times salt played a much more visible role in life than it does today. It was not only used to add taste to food, it was essential to many aspects of life. It was essential for the preservation of meat and vegetables. It was used as medicine. It was used to clean and disinfect. It was even used as an alternative currency in places. When covenants were signed salt was used as a symbol of their permanence. And for many other things, and in many other ways, as we discussed before salt was a precious commodity, even a little bit was worth a lot. And in Jesus' day salt was everywhere, used in every aspect of life, and it was very precious.

When Jesus climbs a mountain to address the crowds that are following him and starts with the words “You are the salt of the earth” he is not calling people like you and me to be people that add the good taste of the Kingdom to the world. It is much more than that, because the use and meaning of salt would have been far more complex and involved for Jesus and his contemporaries. Preservation, hospitality, protection against evil, a staple food for every layer of society, medication, symbol of permanence and covenant, and as an ingredient for embalming, a reminder of the finality of life.

All these aspects of the use of salt come into play when Jesus says: “You are the salt of the earth”. And then: he addresses these words to a large crowd of people that contained the poor, sick, and down and out of Jesus’ day as well as some of the wealthy upper class elite. They are all addressed by Jesus, they are all salt. The stuff that gives taste, that signals a welcome when it is put before visitors, that preserves precious foodstuffs, that cleans and heals and keeps us healthy, that symbolises the permanence and validity of a covenant. There is no future tense in that, no “you should”, or “work hard to be”. They are, we are, just as they/we are, the salt of the earth. It may reveal itself in different ways, but all of us have it in us to contribute to the tastiness of this world, to hospitality, to the preservation of what is good, to healing, to the disinfecting, to the honouring of covenants and the throwing out of demons. Jesus is not concerned about whether we need to become salt. No, it is losing our natural ability to be salt for the world, that is what bothers him. The loss of what God has created us to be.

It is in our nature to be kernels of Kingdom sown in the world to give taste, to preserve goodness, to offer hospitality, to protect against evil, to honour covenants, to provide healing and health to the world. God has created us that way, it is in our system. We are light, and we can illuminate the world around us, until we put our light under a bushel and stop it from radiating out.

When we are not salt, not light, it is not because we failed to learn something or do something, it is because we have unlearned something, have unlearned to be what we are. We have lost the connection with that which is of God. Because, in other words, sin has severed our relationship with the core of our being, with the Spirit of God which lives in us from our beginnings.

Jesus showed us what we can be if we let ourselves be what we, in God’s name, are. What it means to let our saltiness give taste to our lives and to the world that surrounds us, to let our light shine and not hide it under a bushel. He came calling on the divine spark that lives deep inside us to come out and take over, to pierce through the layers of muddled darkness and shine.

It is not hard. It is just a matter of following the deepest, truest instincts of goodness and light God created in us. To surrender to being what God intended us to be like when God created us. Because only the littlest bit of what is truly us can make all the difference and change the taste of life, heal it and lighten it for many.

Wouldn’t it be great if we were intent on not losing our saltiness with the same abandon as our dog Charlie did earlier this week, gathering it in where we can, so we make sure we keep our balance even where the heat of life is on, and make sure we are fit and energetic enough to run the race for the Kingdom?

Amen.