

**SERMON FOR DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: 8/2/2026:
SUNDAY BETWEEN 4 AND 10 FEBRUARY (OS5)
Mtt 5:13-20:
SALT AND LIGHT- A FEW THOUGHTS FROM A THEOLOGICAL AND
SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE: GEOFF CHADWICKⁱ**

[Jesus said]¹³ *'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

¹⁴ *'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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. Mtt 5:13-16, NRSV*

When Jesus says “*You are the salt of the earth*”, and “*You are the light of the world*” he is, of course, using metaphor. A metaphor is designed to carry a meaning for one thing by using something else as a description. In this instance, Jesus is describing personal character by using *salt* and *light* as the conveyers of meaning.

So what did he mean?

SALT:

Let's begin with salt. In Jesus' day, salt was valued for various reasons.

Firstly, it was a known food preservative. Without salt, food would spoil. (Unless it was dried or smoked). Even today we continue to Salt fish and pickle olives in brine.

Secondly, it could be used as currency. Salt's food preservation properties made it so valuable that it was sometimes used to pay Roman soldiers' their salary (a derivation of the Latin *sal* for salt).

Thirdly, salt was used as a flavour enhancer- as we still do today. A pinch being enough to enhance a broth – but not too much lest you spoil it!

Fourthly, salt could be used as a weapon. Invading armies were known to lace their enemy's fresh water supplies with salt, or to ruin their farmland with it.

Fifthly, salt could be used as a road-base to keep the weeds down and hold the soil in place.

This may be what Jesus meant when he said that worthless salt is “*trampled underfoot*”.

Sixthly, salt obtained from the Dead Sea in Jesus’ time contained many impurities. This may account for Jesus’ strange comment about salt losing its saltiness. Pure salt can’t do this, but a bad, impure mixture would be worthless.

So which of these meanings did Jesus intend? Was he saying his followers should be “preservative” or “flavour enhancers”, or “currency”, or “weapons” or even “road base”?

The favoured views are “preservative” and “flavour enhancers”. This would have made sense to the early church members who first heard Matthew’s Gospel. Small in number, and surrounded by opposition, the call to be salt, is a call to perseverance. The passage is saying: *Small, you may well be, but your impact is large.* This call is as relevant today as it was back then. As Christians our faith is both life preserving and life enhancing. When this is our character, we are being true to Jesus. Nevertheless, when we are being a destructive weapon, or bitter, or flavourless, we have lost our character. At this point we are as worthless as road base.

Modern science tells us things about salt that the people of Jesus’ day would never have dreamed of.

There are many types of salts, but they all consist of non-metal and metal ions bound together in a strong crystalline structure. Being strong, these crystals have very high melting points. (Sodium Chloride 801°C.) Nevertheless, many salts (not all) are easily dissolved in water because of the unique polar nature of water molecules. Such solutions are then able to conduct electricity- making them very useful.

Human blood is also saline. The dissolved sodium ions regulate the water content of cells.

Illness occurs if their concentration is too high or too low.

Can we push Jesus' metaphor to include these things? Perhaps not as that would be taking his words out of context. Nevertheless, if salts are essential for life, then our character must be on the side of life. If salts are strong, then we too should be strong. And if salts are dissolvable, then we too must distribute the message of Jesus in and amongst the community!

LIGHT

Light has always fascinated human beings. Even to this day its character and nature are not fully understood. Of course, Jesus is using a well understood metaphor of the day. Light referred to "the gaining of wisdom" ("enlightenment"), "truth", the "dispeller of evil"; and in its most dazzling form, the presence of God. (In Hebrew: *shekhinah*.)

Again, when Jesus is saying "*You are the light of the world*" he is talking about character.

He's talking about being wise, being truthful, shunning evil, and reflecting God's glory. It's a challenge, because he knows only too well how easy it is for people to live in darkness.

Curiously, both salt and light are effective in minuscule. Too much salt, and a dish is ruined.

Too much light, and a person is dazzled! A little bit of light is all you need to shine in the darkness. Soldiers are told not to "*light up a smoke at night*" because an enemy can see you from about 3km away!

Again, Jesus' words, as proclaimed to the fledgling early church, are about perseverance.

"You may be small in number, but the impact is greater than you think. Be faithful, hold on to wisdom, maintain truth, and resist evil. Whilst you may not know it, it is being seen."

And so, that message still holds true for us today.

Just as with salt, modern science has things to say about light that the people of Jesus' day would never had known.

In 1924 when Edwin Hubble traced the trajectory and speed of the stars, he discovered that they all originated from one point of origin at the same time. We now know that to be about

13.7 billion years ago. Since then, we have realised that the origin of everything in the universe began at this point in what is now called the “big bang”. Though totally incomprehensible, it is thought that energy (including light), time, and matter all came into existence at this event. Strangely, it is not possible to ask what happened before the “big-bang” because time did not exist then. The big bang is when time, energy, mass and light began. So, according to science, light is a fundamental property of the universe which cannot be derived from anything else. Light is light and how mysterious it is! At times it behaves as if it was made up of little bundles of energy called photons. At other times it behaves like a wave of electromagnetic energy. In Jesus’ day the origin of colours was not understood; we now know it is due to differing frequencies of these electromagnetic waves.

What’s also fascinating, is that the Hebrew poets who wrote the first Creation story in Genesis placed light at the origin of all things-even before the creation of the Sun. Somehow, they knew its fundamental nature!

We also know that heat and light are closely associated with each other because hot objects usually shine brightly. There is also such a thing as “cool light” where light is made without heat. Fireflies are masters at it!

Having said this, a link between Jesus’ saying and the scientific view is that of fundamental character. Just as physical light is a fundamental property of the universe, enlightenment is a fundamental property of Christian Character. This character can be seen from “miles off” and it is not without effect. Others “may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

That’s a challenge!

Salt and light- both are effective in small measure! So let us not underestimate the small things we do to honour Jesus. They will be tasted and seen!

ⁱ Before Geoff studied Theology and was ordained, he studied Chemistry and taught secondary school science for a number of years.