

MATTHEW 5:13-20  
ATTRACTIVE LIVING

Desert Island Discs celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday last week; there was a big fuss made of David Beckham as the celebrity who was on the programme to mark that anniversary. I didn't hear it but I heard that his best choice of a song was Ella Fitzgerald singing *Every time we say goodbye*; his book of choice was a cookbook, teaching him to cook anywhere and his luxury item was his England caps. I've heard a few people say in the last few months that living on a desert island is an attractive idea: all the things that are going on in the world around us make us concerned and sometimes frighten us, whether it is Brexit or Trump or whatever else; equally there are personal issues that we need to deal with and living on a desert island listening to good music, or eating good food, or escaping from the world in which we live would seem to be such a good idea. People have always had that urge to withdraw from the world: hermits have gone to live in the desert and in caves to take themselves away from the world; monks in monasteries have withdrawn in order to focus on God and prayer.

Attractive as that may sound, that is not real life for most of us. We live in a world full of things that we find hard, full of conflict and challenges; it is a world full of tough choices and things that change! There are events that we find hard; there are people that we find 'challenging'. This is the real world in which we live. This is the world in which we are called to be salt and light. Being salt and light is not about taking ourselves out of the world: if there is no salt, the world loses a flavour of goodness that we are called to bring; if there is no light, the world would be an even darker place than it is now! In this world, Jesus calls us to be salt and light. This is not about advertising ourselves to the world, but about reflecting Jesus to the world around us; by simply living in His ways, we bring both flavour and light to the world around us and something of Jesus spills over into our little part of that world.

If we had been here last week, we'd have been considering the first part of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, this collection of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5-7 in which Jesus teaches us what it means to be disciples. The first part of that sermon is the collection of sayings that we call the Beatitudes, eight qualities of the disciple by which we are to live our lives. Read them for yourselves later and see how Jesus describes our lives and how we are blessed by God in living by these values. He talks about us being poor in spirit, about being meek, about being hungry for what is right, being merciful: it is a set of values that is often quite different from the values of the world around. Here is a picture of the disciple living in Jesus' way and blessed by God. The challenge for us is to live by these values in our world, to be humble, to forgive those who hurt us, to aim to be pure, to make peace not conflict. This how Jesus wants us to live.

This is about values. We all have values that shape our lives whether we ever put them into words or not. "Me-first" is a value; if that is our value then the way in which we think, the way in which we speak, the way in which we behave, is all shaped by putting me first. If everyone lives by that value, then we have a simple recipe for conflict because we all want to be the first over the heads of other people. The Beatitudes show us Jesus' values, the ways in which He shaped His life and the ways in which He wants us to shape our lives; it is a better set of values that puts God first and other people next and ourselves last. These are His values and these are to be our values too! It is easy to agree that these values are good; it is much harder to put them into practice; but we are called to put them into practice and let Jesus' values shape our lives.

These values in our lives make us salt and light! "*you are...*" (*Matthew 5:13*) The books will tell you that salt has three qualities: that it is famous for its purity, that it acts as a preservative and that it gives flavour to food. Some will draw conclusions from each of these qualities to try to understand what Jesus means. As I said earlier, the easiest way of understanding this is the notion of flavour. Salt gives flavour to our food; the Christian disciple is to give good flavour

to the world. Let me give you an example: so much in the political news at moment is about power and pride and bravado; there are people all over the place throwing their weight around and people who are weak and vulnerable are in danger of being squashed. Jesus says *"Blessed are..."* (Matthew 5:5) If we as Christians get on board with power and pride and bravado and start throwing our weight around too, how are we any different? But if we are meek and humble and gentle, then we show the world that there is a different way to be, to some a more attractive way, a way that takes notice of other people, especially those who are weak and vulnerable. So, we add a different flavour to the world around us. It was Jesus' way too!

"Selfie" is a new word of our generation! They are good fun at times; I've taken them myself! Last summer on holiday in Budapest, we were visiting the castle on the hill that is now a museum and a place where tourists go; the building is interesting and there are good views over the city. I watched as one tourist had her phone on its selfie stick and her camera was taking a video – of her! She was not taking anything of the city, but just of her as she walked around, smiling! All she would have when she got home was a pile of video of herself and that's obviously what she wanted. You don't need to go to Budapest to see evidence of the "Self" society: just watch people drive around the city and just watch them park their cars. Jesus said *"blessed are..."* (Matthew 5:7) At the very least, merciful people focus on others, on people in need. Being merciful is about being kind, compassionate, forgiving, patient – all qualities that put other people before ourselves! When we do that, we show the world that there is a different way to be, a better way and we add a different flavour to the world. So, we are salt of earth.

*"You are..."* (Matthew 5:14ff) This is a much easier picture to understand, perhaps. What does a city look like at night? You can see the lights for miles; pictures taken in space show the lights of the city from thousands of miles away in the darkness. Even a pinprick of light can be seen from a long way off when it is dark! But there is a warning here and a danger with which we can all sympathise. "Don't hide the light!" There are times when it seems so much easier to be a hidden Christian; in the melee of everyday life it is easy to hide ourselves away and not make ourselves different in any way, shape or form. We hide our light under a basket and pretend that we're just like everyone else. The light is hidden when we do that and the world is just a little bit darker when there is no light is to be seen. By living in Jesus's way, light is seen; His light is reflected from us into the world about us and people, we hope and pray, are drawn to what they see in us.

Go back to the selfie for a moment: this is not about us and promoting ourselves. If we think that Jesus is calling us to show off how good we are and make a fuss about how many good qualities we have, then we've got this horribly wrong. If you take the selfie to extreme, then all you have are pictures of yourself. That is not what this is about. This is about reflecting Jesus to the world, about sharing Jesus. *"That they..."* (Matthew 5:16) We are in the business of showing people what Jesus is like and reflecting Jesus to the world around us and we do that in all sorts of ways. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2, writes about his preaching and clearly says that the focus of his preaching is Jesus and Him crucified; Paul is not about making Paul seem great or drawing people to be disciples of Paul; He is about making Jesus seem great and drawing people to be disciples of Jesus. Good preaching is not about the preacher; good preacher will lead us to Jesus. Some do that in preaching; we do it also in the way we live our lives: by the kind of people we are, we lead people to Jesus and not to ourselves.

There is a story about Francis of Assisi, who devoted his life to bringing the gospel to the poor and found all sorts of creative ways of doing that; he was probably the first person to create a nativity scene and he used a live baby! One day he and a brother monk visited a small village in Umbria to preach the gospel. They began by chatting to the villagers, listening to their stories of being poor and then went to help them in their fields and stables until the day was nearly over and it was time to go. Francis' companion was concerned: "Did we not come here to

preach the gospel?” Francis turned and said “If these people have not heard the gospel today, then reading from the Bible will not make any difference to them!” I’m not altogether sure about that last part; there are times when we need to speak the gospel, but the point of the story is that being salt and light is about the kind of people we are and the way we live and the things we do so that people see Jesus in us and want to know why we live by these values! It’s about the way we think: being humble, generous. It’s about the way we speak: being patient, compassionate, and forgiving. It’s about the things we do: to make peace, to do what is right, and what is good.

Flavours: there is an almost endless choice of flavours for your food, spices and sauces or none! We are called to flavour the world with Jesus. That may sound bizarre, but that’s what being the salt of the earth is all about; that’s what being the light of the world is all about. It’s about influence, a Christ-like influence in the world. We are the flavour that the world needs in order to live to at its highest; at our best, we are the highest good for the world, because we bring Jesus to a world that needs Him. This is our mission in life; this is what we already are as disciples of Jesus. The key to this is values: what are our values? what are Jesus’ values? How do we live by Jesus’ values? How do we put these values into practice? When we put these values into practice, we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world! It doesn’t get any better than that; we don’t have any higher a calling than that!