



+ ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 30th July 2023, 9th Sunday after Pentecost

A Salty Conversation by Rev Sharon Ross Ensor

*Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. **Colossians 4:2-6***

*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. **Matthew 5: 13***

I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister 35 years ago this year. I've served in a number of congregations as a parish minister, in Auckland, Wellington and Hamilton. I've also had a national church role supporting the special character of our Presbyterian Church Schools' around NZ through the Presbyterian Schools' Resource Office. Like you, I'm sure, I've seen a great deal of change in the Presbyterian Church over the last 35 years...one of the congregations I was minister at in Wellington closed at the end of March, no longer able to sustain its life and mission. In Hamilton where we lived until recently, the St Stephens congregation closed a couple of weeks ago, following St Clare's which closed 18 months ago.

We are in a vulnerable place as we move into our future as a church. There are certainly some bright lights with things going on in the Presbyterian Church, you might feel that St Heliers Presbyterian is one of those bright lights...but when you look around it is easy to feel discouraged and to feel that 'the church is dying'....certainly many of the old patterns are dying as aging and declining congregations recognise that they can no longer continue...but new things are emerging in their place and after all, we do follow a God of resurrection life who we meet in Jesus Christ.

I want to offer you a few thoughts today about our life as the church both as a whole and for each one of us as participants in it and to use some stories from Presbyterian Support Northern, where I

now work in the role of Presbytery Liaison Manager, working to strengthen the connection between PSN and the Presbyterian Church.

I'm using the image of salt which we've heard in our Bible readings today and I've appreciated reading the Rev Dr Sally Douglas's book "The Church as Salt" in this regard. Sally Douglas is a theologian and minister in the Uniting Church in Australia.

So, let's have a bit of a salty conversation as we think about Jesus' call to us to be "salt of the earth". Three things about salt this morning.

The first thing to say about salt, at the risk of stating the obvious, is that it is little.

Have you noticed that in the gospels Jesus seems to be fascinated with little things. He often uses little things to talk about how God is at work in the world and to teach us about experiencing life in its fulness ...children, sheep, seeds, yeast, birds, coins, bread, lamps...and salt. Salt, as you know is made up of tiny grains....held together it is something life-giving...something we can't live without.

This focus of Jesus on the little things is a hard thing for us to grasp, because we tend in our society to be addicted to bigger and better...to more and more...to assume that growth and expansion is the sign of security and success and God's blessing.

The Presbyterian Church was in something of a golden age in the 50's and 60's...where bigger and better was certainly the assumption of who God was calling us to be and the sign of God's blessing. (*Slide of St David's Presbyterian Church, Khyber Pass and St Giles Presbyterian Church, Mt Roskill*)

St David's Presbyterian Church in Khyber Pass is an example of that age. The other church in the slide is St Giles Presbyterian in Mt Roskill...but I'll come to that.

In its day the St David's congregation was said to have a membership of 999 people (never quite cracked the 1000!)...several services on a Sunday which were all packed. It was a pattern of 'being church' that was repeated all around NZ at that time.

You may be aware that in recent decades the St David's congregation dwindled to a point where it has now closed and the site has now been sold....Alongside the closure of St David's Khyber Pass with its impressive history, another much humbler congregation closed in the last couple of years, St Giles Presbyterian Church at 1207 Dominion Rd Mt Roskill.

It's never easy when a congregation closes...there's often a lot of hurt and pain involved and these things can take time to process. But out of the sadness and sense of loss from closing these two congregations, new things are growing. Things that are small and somewhat uncertain...but they're also full of hope and promise as we recognise the new thing God is doing in this part of the city...

One of the things that happened on the St David's Khyber Pass site until the end of 2021 was the foodbank, operated by Presbyterian Support Northern. An intentional partnership between PSN and Northern Presbytery is seeing this new thing emerging on the 1207 Dominion Rd site which is transforming the previous work of the St David's foodbank. *Slide of Communities Feeding Communities logo*

PSN's initiative at 1207 Dominion Rd is called Communities Feeding Communities. A vision for nurturing and valuing the Puketapapa/Roskill South community, particularly through helping to provide food security for the community which is very multi-cultural and densely populated, with significant social need.

Northern Presbytery owns the buildings and grounds, including a manse. A building which has been moved onto the site, alongside the existing church building, is currently being renovated into a community meeting place including a large community kitchen where cooking classes will be held and community meals made.

A beautiful community garden is now at the front of the church, which was previously just a front lawn. The garden is used to provide fresh produce for the community and allotment gardens are at the back which people from the local community pay a small amount for the use of. We're also planting a food forest with citrus and fruit trees, passionfruit and blueberries. It's now a beautiful, flourishing space which previously was also just bare lawn.

A children's play area has been built in the allotment garden area (built of natural materials...no plastic!) which the children love playing in while their parents tend to their allotment.

There's a Pātaka kai on-site where produce and fresh food are regularly left for people to come and help themselves...or to leave produce for others to take. Developing relationships with the local community are an important focus and as part of that, bread and fresh produce is supplied to the local primary school where team members help with reading recovery and the breakfast club.

Just like when the foodbank was at St David's Khyber Pass, emergency food parcels are still provided from our food pantry, around 50 parcels a week. The vision for this, once the building is renovated, is that it will become a social food pantry where people will pay what they can and can then choose their own food for their family.

It's a vision of the future growing out of the legacy of what was offered before at the St David's site. Communities Feeding Communities!

A Family Works Budgetting mentor is on site once a week. We have just finished a four week cooking class, where participants are given the recipes and ingredients each week for easy, nutritious and tasty meals...it's been a hugely successful venture and something we'll develop even further once we're in the redeveloped building.

As I said , 1207 Dominion Rd is a partnership between PSN and Northern Presbytery who own the land and buildings. PSN employs a Community Coordinator, Kai Co-ordinator and gardener...Northern Presbytery have appointed a minister, Rev Fa'amanu Akeripa who is establishing a new faith community on the site called The Storehouse.

Communities Feeding Communities is about building relationships in the community with humility and hope, courage and faith...listening well and getting alongside the community rather than barging on in with what we think it needs. It has felt small and is about taking our time...but wonderful, life-giving things are happening already and we can't wait to see what God will continue to do with it...

It's an important story for PSN **and** the church as we think about who we are and how we are to be in the communities we are part of and wanting to serve and nurture its wellbeing.

The littleness of salt perhaps has more meaning for us as the church, now that we are no longer sitting at the centre of society like we were in decades past...we are on the edges, regarded with polite indifference at best most of the time. We have lost integrity over recent decades through ongoing stories of abuse, corruption and scandal.

The humility of that position helps us to reflect on what is important in Christian faith.

For Jesus and for the early church it was not about size. Large numbers were not a marker of success. Buildings were irrelevant. Community respect wasn't expected and government support was a distant hope.

The mark of success came down to how people lived as followers of Jesus...how they embodied the Beatitudes which we heard this morning, how God's love, generosity, hospitality, forgiveness was shown to others, to 'be with' those who are vulnerable and, on the edge, and encountering God's Spirit of hope and transformation in those place. In these ways followers of Jesus mirror who God is and how God is at work in the world.

The littleness of salt...something to pay attention to in our following of Jesus.

Another important quality of salt is that it preserves

In those many centuries before refrigeration was created, salting food to keep it from going off was essential for survival. Using salt as a preservative sustained communities over long winters and dry summers for millenia. It also enabled trade to take place over long distances.

A fun fact is that the Latin word 'salarium', originally meant 'salt money' which was paid to Roman soldiers...from which our word 'salary' has developed. An indication of how significant salt was in ancient society.

Origen, was a leader in the early church, the 2nd century. He drew on the image of salt to talk about the work of the church: he said 'for people of God are assuredly the salt of the earth: they preserve the order of the world, and society is held together as long as the salt is uncorrupted.' For Origen the deep down 'order of the world' is known in God's love which embraces 'all things' and is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The church is called to preserve the story of God revealed in Christ. The challenge for us today is wrestling with what that means and to consider whether we sometimes latch on to the wrong things worth preserving.

The calling to 'preserve the order of the world' for Christians is not about preserving the traditions or the current buildings of the church as such...although there are many things in our traditions and practices that are precious and important to hold onto in that. Our focus though needs to be about preserving the story of God revealed in Jesus Christ and wrestling with what that means...how that is embodied within us, the life of the church and given shape, made real in our society today.

A key way for us to hold onto what 'preserving the story of God' is, is in our gathering together to worship God in Christ. To remember and be 're-remembered' by God as we read scripture, pray and praise, share the sacraments together....all those things which ground us, nourish and preserve our faith and shape our life together so that we might join in God's mission in the world.

So...salt is little, salt preserves and finally, **salt adds seasoning**...zest and flavour to the world Those wonderful words from Colossians 4: ⁵ *Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.* ⁶ *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.*

This invites us to recognise that our daily actions, even our passing interactions, all matter...they are each an opportunity to 'sprinkle grace'...but not to overdo it mind...a little salt can go a long way and we all know the experience of food which is oversalted so that the meal is spoilt.

When I think about this aspect of salt...to add flavour to life, I think about the Community Wellbeing Initiative programme which PSN has been running in Northern and Kaimai Presbyteries over recent months.

The Community Wellbeing Initiative programme is led by facilitators from Lifeline Connect, which is one of PSN's services. It aims to increase people's skills in mental wellbeing, both for themselves and for people in their church and wider community.

It focusses on stress, how we recognise it, how we can deal with it in helpful ways, how we can get alongside and 'be with' people who are experiencing stress and distress....being the face of Jesus in our stressed-out world. It's important for us to notice and be able to respond in helpful ways to people experiencing stress and anxiety in our communities today.

Many of the things we can do in support of others are pretty low-key, but they make a difference nonetheless...it's about noticing, picking up on the cues people give...responding in ways which display empathy and compassion...and knowing when to refer people when what we're noticing is beyond our skill and knowledge level.

How can we each help to season our communities with words that are kind and encouraging with actions that build up and add to the life of the communities of which we are a part?

How can we help to draw out the good, the tastiest flavours for everyone?

Jesus tells us that we are salt of the earth...something that is little but makes a real difference wherever it is added...something with life-giving and preserving properties for the communities which we are a part of...something which adds flavour and seasoning to life when it is added with thoughtfulness and care.

May the Spirit continue to open our hearts, our minds, our hands to follow this way of Jesus Christ...the path which brings life in its fullness. Amen