

Salt of the Earth, or: What Makes Up Your Identity?

Sermon on 7/8 February 2026 for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Year A) at St Sebastian's Cathedral

Matthew 5:13–16

From the gospel according to Matthew

¹³"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

Can salt lose its flavour? What do you think? The chemist's answer is clear and simple: No! Salt cannot lose its flavour. Salt will always taste salty – it cannot lose this property because the mineral is sodium chloride – and that is salty. The essence of salt, its identity, is to taste "salty".

But what does Jesus mean when he talks about salt losing its flavour? In his time, people often used salt from the Dead Sea – that salt lake, right on their doorstep. But the salt from the Dead Sea was a mixture. This mixture contained, alongside real salt, other minerals such as gypsum or chalk. Normally, you wouldn't notice this – but if the whole lot got wet, the real salt would gradually be washed out. After all, salt is much more soluble than gypsum or chalk. Well, when the real salt was gone, what remained was a white dust. Because the salt was missing, the taste was gone too. This probably explains why Jesus says that salt can lose its taste and be thrown away. Ultimately, this mixture – which had been mistaken for salt – lost its identity: the salt was gone, and only dust remained. The image of light, which is not light if it cannot

shine, goes in a similar direction: a light that does not shine is not light. In that case, the light too has lost its identity.

With his words about the salt of the earth and the light of the world, Jesus is talking about the identity of a believing person – someone who seeks God. And he is speaking about our identity as Christians, yours and mine. So, what makes up this identity?

One answer – no, many answers – Jesus himself gives in the “Sermon on the Mount”, of which the words about the salt of the earth and the light of the world are a part. Of these many thoughts, I want to mention just three highlights, but – a quick warning in advance – it will not be easy for us. According to Jesus’ words, the identity of a Christian includes:

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. (Mt 5:38–39)

The identity of a Christian also includes:

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, (Mt 5:43–44)

And finally, the identity of a Christian includes:

12 Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. (Mt 7:12)

I admit, these are three demanding sentences – but they show a pattern! And the pattern is: Life only works if people are aware of their mutual dependence. Life only works if we realise it is not possible without others – even if it is difficult. That is why there is no retaliation of eye for eye, tooth for tooth. That is why there is no hatred, but love. That is why: do to others what you would have them do to you.

According to Jesus, the identity of a believing person is to live in relationship and not to separate oneself from others. To encounter

one's fellow human beings with the same respect one wishes for oneself. Not to repay like with like, but to seek what connects. That is what makes up the identity of a Christian: not separation from others, but the search for what connects. This identity overcomes all self-centredness – because it looks into the face of the other.

These days, there is a lot being written and reported about an AfD government programme for Saxony-Anhalt. If you read it, you will notice how strongly this programme is shaped by positions of separation and self-centredness. It invokes a culture that takes only its own perspective into account and denies that the world has changed and grown closer together. While this programme talks about the idea that a commitment “to Christianity and Christian ethics [...] would act more sustainably and [...] make a valuable contribution to our community”, and therefore “Christianity [...] is an essential part of our European culture”, Jesus' values of mutuality are missing. There is mutuality, but only with one's own – those belonging to one's own people, those who have the same attitudes as oneself, for example towards nation, people, marriage and family – but at the same time, mutuality with others, with foreigners, with migrants, with refugees is missing. Here, it is more about separation: us and the others. But:

12 Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. (Mt 7:12)

Do to others whatever you would have them do to you: That is Christian identity! That is the flavour of the salt of the earth. It corresponds to the shining of the light of the world on the lampstand. When I read the election programme, it seems to me like what is left of the salt from the Dead Sea: the real salt of Christianity has been washed out, and what remains is gypsum and chalk, only the dust of populist and extremist ideas.

What does that mean for you and me? Look around your church, and you will see that this church has a migrant face. Being Christian, especially in the Catholic sense, means being part of a global community that does not define itself by German, not even by

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European culture. Against this background, we must ask ourselves – I must ask myself, you must ask yourself – whether these ideas, which over the coming months will be presented to you in various election programmes – no matter from which direction – actually fit with your own Christian identity, or whether they do not. And then it is up to us to let our salt taste salty, to let the light shine. Not to join in with populist talk in family conversations, over the garden fence, at the baker's, but to have the courage to stand up for the idea of mutuality that comes so strongly from Jesus. To remind people what this Christian identity is about:

12 Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. (Mt 7:12)

And not: Us and the others. Not: Eye for eye. Not: Tooth for tooth!

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