

“If salt have lost his savour?”

From September 1971 to December 1973 I taught in Uganda, sharing a large house with three other bachelors on the staff of Kabalega Secondary School, Masindi. The year before I arrived, the other three had employed an elderly gentleman (Mzee) as a cook. He had presented references going back to the 1920's when he started as a kitchen boy. Over the years he progressed to the role of cook for a District Commissioner who later became a Provincial Commissioner and finally the first Director of the Queen Elizabeth National Park. We were, therefore, able to boast that our cook had cooked for the Queen Mother when she had paid a private visit to the Park named in her honour!

If you remember 1972; Idi Amin threw out the Asian population of Uganda, many coming to the UK. Before the expulsion the country had been very prosperous agriculturally, exporting many products. The Madhvani group produced our granulated sugar – it had a slight greyish appearance. Technicians expelled, machinery in the sugar refinery broke down and couldn't be repaired – there was a shortage of sugar. One day we sat down to a meal and there was a bowl of glistening white sugar! Al, our cook, was teased about Kenyan sugar being better than Ugandan sugar. He drew himself up to the whole of his 5 feet one inch and told us that the bag containing this 'white' sugar had stencilled on it “Product of the United Kingdom”!!!

Why have I told you that story? During the shortages and the subsequent rationing one thing became clear. We Europeans were anxious about the supply of our sugar; Ugandan colleagues were not unduly concerned about sugar but they were very concerned about a shortage of salt. We quickly developed mutual 'swapping' of the required commodities!

That event in 1972 has brought us back to **salt**. If you have been following the Lectionary Thoughts from the second service you will remember that the introduction to Psalm 60 (15th Sunday in Ordinary Time) mentioned a great victory for Joab and the Israelites in the **Valley of Salt**. It was such an important commodity that geographical regions were named for the presence of this mineral.

You will recognise the quotation in the heading (the language is that of the Authorised KJV). It comes from Matthew 5 where Jesus says (this time NIV translation):

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

One Sunday morning in Croydon some years ago, a retired civil engineer friend came up to me and said: “Eric, you teach Chemistry”. My heart fell – what complex question was he going to ask? I soon learnt what he wanted to know – how could salt lose its saltiness? On my part there was a moment of silent relief; that was an easy question to answer and it takes us directly to the salt that would have been familiar to the people Jesus was addressing – salt from that Valley of Salt.

Back to Uganda. Very near the Queen Elizabeth National Park is Lake Katwe, a salt lake. Like the Dead Sea, water flows in but can only escape by evaporation, leaving behind all the mineral salts carried by the entering water, which sink to the lake/sea bed. The photograph shows slabs cut from the lake bed and being brought ashore. They contain salt and are used as salt licks for cattle.



In this country we are familiar with our pure 'table salt' and tend to forget the natural form in which it is found. In Cheshire, there are two underground salt deposits – one lower than the other - each of these was once a salt lake. There is one mine there bringing 'rock salt' to the surface; its principal use being on roads in frosty weather, you may have seen TV News coverage of lorries queuing in winter to collect the salt.

Answering the question, 'how does salt lose its saltiness'? look carefully at a pile of crushed rock salt that has been left in a lay-by for some length of time. It is probably covered with glistening white crystals, soluble salt has dissolved in rainwater then evaporated on the surface (or been washed away).



It is easy to obtain 'pure' salt from the dirty brown Cheshire rock salt. Crush the salt, add water, stir the mixture to dissolve the salt, filter and evaporate!

The first photograph was taken inside the Winsford salt mine. I remember a visit to the mine while at university. Our guide walked up to one of the 'rock' walls and, in the dark, placed his torch on the solid surface. The whole area around his torch glowed a translucent pink in colour.

The majority of mined salt in the Cheshire deposits is obtained by solution mining. Water pumped down, brine brought up.

Why is salt so important? It has three principal uses – improving flavour (the savour of Authorised Version); as a preservative and finally medicinal use in preventing infection in wounds. It was such an important commodity at the time of Jesus that some people used salt as a form of currency. Our word ‘salary’ is derived from the Latin ‘*salarium*’ - salt-money or soldiers pay. One of the trade routes near Rome, used to transport salt, is still known as the ‘*via salaria*’.

The flavour of food is enhanced by the addition of a small amount of salt. When preparing to go to Uganda I remember my father rather pessimistically saying that I would have to take salt tablets. I never did have or take any, but this was the only period of my life when food had limited taste unless salt was added to it at the table. I needed the savour because I needed the salt.

Jesus was saying to His listeners and is still saying to us, His followers, “You are the salt of the earth”.

We are needed to bring ‘savour’ into the world. It is through us, through our lives and influence that those around us have the quality of their lives enhanced. Note what Jesus goes on to say – Salt that has had the ‘real salt content’ leached out of it, is worthless it is only fit to be thrown on the ground. I still have, filed away, the dried filter paper carrying the residue from the home extraction of salt seen in the photographs. That residue has no practical use!

We are the salt of the world – but if we have lost our saltiness what is our worth?

Salt also preserves and heals. If we are the salt of the earth this should be another of our roles in the community. How do we preserve? – is it clear that our lives are committed to a Saviour (a Preserver)? Do we offer the way to find New Life in Jesus? To those whose lives are in need of healing, do we share with them our experience of the risen Christ?

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said “You are the salt of the earth”; at the same time He gave another comparison – “You are the light of the world”. A very small light penetrates the darkness very effectively – that oft quoted “blackout” phrase from WW2, “Put out that light!” The smallest crack could reveal, to an observer miles away, the presence of habitation or industry. We are the light of the world – we have that effect, being seen clearly.

Jesus talks about a city on a hill – most towns and cities of His day we built on hill-tops, not in valley bottoms - you can’t hide it. A lamp is not lit and hidden, its purpose is to provide light. Jesus said, and says today, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”.

We are called to be that salt and that light. In the words of Chris Bowater:

The time is right in the nation
For works of power and authority
God's looking for a people who are willing
To be counted in His glorious victory

As salt are we ready to savour?
In darkness are we ready to be light?
God's seeking out a very special people
To manifest His truth and His might

*Here I am, wholly available
As for me, I will serve the Lord
Here I am, wholly available
As for me, I will serve the Lord*

Eric Brown