

Sermon 5th Sunday after Epiphany, Yr. A @ St Johns – 5/2/17

“The essential Salt of Christ” (Matthew 5:13)

Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds to your Word to us today, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Back in July on day 10 of my pilgrimage in Spain during the northern summer, I was walking over a range of mountains from Belorado to a little town in the hills called Ages. It was in a week that'd been quite warm (low to mid-30's) through the last few of days. That day we were ascending steadily in the first few hours from 700m to 1,100m, then crossing the range which was covered in pine plantations with little else to see. Since it had risen, the sun had been blazing down upon us with hardly a cloud in the sky and without a whiff of breeze to cool our perspiration. To add to it my blisters were beginning to become quite a problem for me. I carried my 13kg pack as usual with enough water and supplies for the day and I took the ascent at a solid, steady pace with my companions.

We took all the usual precautions of walking through the heat like *'Slip, Slop, Slap'* and drinking plenty of fluids but I found that by the fourth hour, around lunch time, that I was becoming a little fatigued. After our lunch break we found ourselves on a very open and exposed dirt track wide enough for four lanes of traffic through this plantation. Without any wind, any cloud cover, and being so exposed it became very hot indeed walking those next 9kms. As I finally trudged into a town in which we could have ended our day, and as we sat in some shade, my companions noticed that I was having difficulty cooling down. They wanted to keep going a little further to the next little town of Ages, about 4kms on while they still had the energy and before the sun got too much. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do but I talked them into staying a few more minutes so I could rest for a bit. As I hadn't really improved, they encouraged me to stop and stay there the night, but being determined, and a little stubborn, I decided to steel myself and go with them that extra hour. So, I bought a cool drink from a vending machine and set to it.

As we walked out of town, a few hundred metres down the road, the heat from the bitumen road hit us like a sledge hammer – but again, I steeled myself and trudged on. We eventually found the path through the hills and as we walked, I sought to step through every bit of shade I could find. That was until the last two kilometres where we were again exposed to the sun as we plodded into the little town. My Italian 'companyeros' were trying to decide on which small albergue (pilgrim hostel) we should stay at but by that stage I was seriously beginning to fade out with dizziness. So I didn't really care. I just wanted to sit in the shade and cool down. After we checked in I found my bunk and flopped. Half an hour later I dragged myself into a cool shower then did my usual laundry for the day. I felt very light headed and like I was 'in another world.' I remember being asked what I

wanted to eat for dinner but I couldn't make a clear decision and I didn't really care. I just wanted to finish up, hang my clothes and crash. Something was seriously wrong. For the next few hours I dozed and sweated profusely. I was woken for dinner and barely made it to the table with the others. In fact, they were surprised to see me as they'd become quite concerned I was not my usual self. As we were his only guests the hospitalero had made a really nice traditional Spanish chicken paella for us. After a few mouthfuls I felt like I was going to be sick, and I really just wanted to lie down again, so I apologised, excused myself and went back to bed. I was woken at around 9pm by one of my companions who had kindly collected my washing from the line for me. My companions *were* very worried for me.

One of the girls then quietly said to me, *"You really aren't well, are you?"* *"No,"* I replied, *"I think I have heat exhaustion, or heat stroke. I don't know what happened but I was just too hot."* *"You know,"* she said, *"you really have to stop your Camino and go take a bus to find a doctor. You can come back and start here again when you're better."* Those words hit me like a brick. I just couldn't work out what had happened. I drank enough water; I wore the right clothing, even though I had pushed myself that little bit further. I couldn't accept her declaration. So stubbornly I said, *"Well, I'll sleep on it. If I can get up with everyone else, pack my gear and eat some breakfast and feel alright, then I'm going on. If I can't, then, I'll make my decision."* I prayed that the Lord would make it clear by the morning if there was something seriously wrong, then filled my water bottles, took a long draught and then went back to bed.

I woke with the rest before dawn, managed to pack my bag and eat a light breakfast. My companions shared their concern at how I had been that last night. But I was determined to go on. I felt better, and I reasoned that as it was only 18kms into the city of Burgos (the shortest leg thus far) I'd see how I'd go. They accepted my resolve and I thank God I made it safely to Burgos that day.

So, what happened to me? Reflecting on things that next day, I realised that my body was clearly suffering under the stress of heat exhaustion, which could very quickly have entered into heat stroke – a critical condition that requires emergency help. I'd been drinking the usual amounts of water, but *what* had I missed? I knew the answer as I thought it through ...salt.

Salt is a very important mineral that under such physically demanding conditions as prolonged exercise over multiple days, particularly in hot or humid climates, it is vital to replenish the salt in our body so that the cells and blood can hold onto the water we consume. When we sweat, we sweat out both water and minerals and eventually, once the body's reserves are depleted and without these essential minerals being replenished, then the body cannot cool itself efficiently, nor retain

the water consumed. I learned a hard but important lesson that day: under such extreme conditions, taking in extra salt is vital for our survival. I had enough in my body initially but through the harsh conditions it had slowly leached out without me realising it until *almost* too late. So from then on, at every evening meal, I added that extra few shakes of salt, and the occasional electrolyte drink during the day. It could have ended very poorly if I'd not heeded my body's warning and learned that lesson quick smart. For we were on the verge of entering the inland desert plateau called 'The Meseta' which we would walk through for the next week in the heat of summer.

So, the mineral sodium chloride is vital for our survival in extreme conditions. So too, a kind of salt is vital for our spiritual journey, our Camino, through life. Jesus says, "*You are the salt of the earth...*" (Matt. 5:13). Jesus reminds us today of who we are, as those whom He has chosen, as those who have received Him and His gifts of forgiveness for our sins through the Cross, and as those who are born again in a new spiritual birth, and now live as His disciples, that we ARE the salt of the earth. *We are the redeemed*. We have been set free from the sins of our past by Jesus. We have been raised to resurrection life – all because we are now, by the grace and power of God, *IN Him, in Christ*, through Baptism.

But here is the *but...* "*But if the salt loses its saltiness,*" says Jesus, "*how can it be made salty again?*" If we forget who we are; if we walk continually back to our old ways; if we do not keep following Him; if we fail to confess our sin; if we become lazy in our spiritual walk; if we detach ourselves from the people of God; if we fail to love or serve our neighbour; if we take God's grace for granted; if we let other things become our god or our life's focus instead of Christ; if we treat God's name or those around us with contempt... then salt *can lose* its saltiness. 'If, like me, the Body of Christ loses its saltiness, *how can* it be made salty again?' It is worthless, tasteless, bland, tainted, no longer useful for the purpose for *which it was made* – namely, to add God's special flavour to those around us – then that 'useless salt' should be thrown out on the street to be trampled like the dirt.

Jesus reminds us as His disciples that following Him is hard, but it is not impossible. He reminds us that it's difficult for us if we allow ourselves to lose our 'saltiness,' our flavour of faith, through the trials, or the pleasures or pursuits of this life, to be made salty again. In effect, He's saying, "*Friends, out there in the world, without the salt you need to survive – without me feeding you, forgiving you, teaching you, filling you, renewing you; without you putting my love and grace into action for the good of your neighbour, or yourself... your faith will die... you risk not surviving the harsh conditions that you must travel for my sake.*" [Pause]

...But, there is *another but...* because God is rich in mercy and compassion, and because of His promises, made certain for us by Jesus' sacrifice, *it is possible* for

God to make us salty again (just as I had a second chance to learn and grow). It *is possible* for God to make us *new again*. It *is possible* for God to forgive us *once more* and restore us to wholeness again. It *is possible* for God to help us as we confess our laziness towards the work of His Kingdom, or as we confess our indifference to the prompting of His Holy Spirit who daily calls us in Jesus' name to add the flavour of Christ and His love into the lives of those around us.

It *is possible* for God to renew *our congregation* in its mission heart for Jesus... it *is possible* for God to use us once more if we are willing... it *is possible* for God to grow our faith to new strengths... it *is possible* for God to restore our hope and vigour despite our sufferings... it *is possible* for God to use every single one of His people in this place to be Christ bearers to the lost, the suffering, the burdened, the lonely, the neighbour, the stranger... and to one another. All we need to realise is that by His grace God *is willing* to use even us... to make us new... and for us to know that, because of Jesus, we *are already IN Him, in Christ*. We are *already* made into salt, *His* salt to bring His new flavour into the world around us. Jesus simply needs us to be His willing hands and feet, His loving voice, His listening ear, His gracious strength and His encouraging presence wherever we go.

Just as salt is an essential mineral for our bodies, *Jesus* is essential for the spiritual wellbeing of the Christian, and indeed for all humanity. Our Lord says to us today, "*Friends, because of me, you are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world. Now, as you go, just be whom I have made you to be in my love.*" Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.