



parish community we're all driving at the same speed or even in the same direction! We may not notice that we haven't seen so-and-so as much as we used to. (I've always meant to keep a roll!) Maybe we assumed they were looking after grandchildren, gone for a holiday, whatever. It does no harm to say 'It's nice to see you; haven't seen you for a while. Is everything OK'? It does no harm either to mention it to the clergy. But of course you will all be aware that there are ways of saying things! We may stumble a bit, but isn't that better than doing nothing and saying nothing. That suggests a degree of indifference; it almost suggests that their absence had no effect at all.

The Gospel for today isn't a particularly happy one, not at all. It brings to mind those incredibly sad and nasty events that seem so common – examples of clerical abuse, bishops and clergy falling well short of what might be expected. Having said that, the remedies, the responses spelled out in the reading: *'It would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea'* aren't any more pleasant. What is clear though is the seriousness of the situation.

Compare that with last week's reading. Jesus took the little child and blessed him: *Whomever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whomever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.* And later on we read: *Jesus took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.*

The contrast is extraordinary. Almost as extraordinary as the conclusion Jesus draws. Disciples are not to be stumbling blocks, but to be salt. "Salt is good, but if the salt becomes unsalty then with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

To be honest, I've never quite understood what there is about salt – except when I forget to add it to the porridge. I recall visiting Salzburg (yes, it's named after salt) and being offered the opportunity to visit a salt mine. My basic response was: Do you think I've travelled across the world to see a salt mine? Instead we went on the Sound of Music tour and also visited the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's mountain headquarters at Berchtesgaden near Obersalzberg (there's mention of salt again). No, salt just doesn't do it for me!

Oddly enough salt does make a difference, even just a little bit. What's the first thing many of us do when we visit a restaurant after the waiter or waitress brings us our food? We salt it.

In the ancient world salt was a necessity of life. Salt had an important role in Hebrew worship. The grain offering, burnt offering and incense all had to be salted. Salt was a sign of fidelity and friendship and so it was used to ratify covenants, including God's Covenants with His people in the Old Testament. It was used as fertiliser, but they had to be careful as too much of it would damage the soil.

The book of [Deuteronomy warns that: 'the whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulphur — nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, places which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger.](#) All its land is brimstone and salt, a burning waste, unsown and unproductive and no grass grows in it.'

Used in moderation, however, salt purifies, cleanses and preserves from corruption. Thus God uses His disciples as agents of purification, cleansing and preservation in the world. In Leviticus God commands the people not to leave

salt out of their grain offerings and indeed with all their offerings they were commanded to offer salt.

Salt adds flavour to tasteless food. And it's hard to imagine fish and chips without salt being shaken over them. Thus the Holy Spirit uses disciples of Jesus to influence this world with all its problems. Through the power of Jesus we are called to 'talk the talk and walk the walk'. To make a difference. Salt prevents food from decaying. And so as disciples of Jesus we must be agents of the Holy Spirit to make this a better world, a more just society. So that his will may be done on earth as it already is in heaven. Jesus warns: "*if the salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? How can you make it salty again? It's no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under men's feet.*"

Israel got her salt from the Dead Sea and from the Hill of Salt. The Dead Sea is nine times more salty than the ocean. The Hill of Salt is in the south-western corner of the Dead Sea. It's where Lot's wife was turned into a 'pillar of salt'. The salt in this region is of the rock or fossil type. The outer layer is filled with impurities, it undergoes frequent chemical changes, it generally lacks flavour. And so this outer layer was usually destroyed, because it was worthless. Thus disciples who lost interest in being 'salt' for Jesus can no longer be effective servants unless they repent and are restored.

It's a stark choice: you can be either a stumbling block or a pinch of salt. What will it be?