



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

## The Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

February 5, 2017

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

### Today's Scriptures

Last week, Jesus used the Beatitudes to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God. In today's passage, Jesus compares their role in building that kingdom to salt and light. As his disciples, the distinctive way in which they lived their lives should "season" the world around them, making their lives attractive to others, while preserving all that was good in the world. Jesus also said that when they lived lives consistent with his kingdom, they would be "light" to a world that existed in darkness without it. Lives lived for God glorify him; God's glory, reflected in his people, would be a light that would draw others to him. Jesus instructed his disciples that if they were not actively living as salt and as light in the world, their discipleship was as good as useless.

This same theme runs throughout today's First Reading. Today's passage is from the latter part of the Book of Isaiah, in which the prophet addressed the Israelites at the end of their long captivity in Babylon. Both before and during their captivity, the people of God often followed God's law but with hearts unengaged, making their practice empty of meaning and their rituals, worthless to God. As they returned from exile, Isaiah urged the people to demonstrate their commitment to God by acting in ways that truly pleased him: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, working for justice. These concrete, outward signs of concern for others would reflect lives of integrity and virtue that stem from a sincere, inward devotion to God. Isaiah wanted his people to understand that the sincere practice of faith comes with responsibilities: if a love for God and others is not evident in how they live, their religious practice is empty of meaning. If their love of God is reflected in lives of charity, then they will be a light to all people, drawing them to God.

Just before St. Paul went to Corinth, he went to Athens. There, he attempted to engage the Athenians—who valued intellect, wealth, and status—in a theological discussion about God. Paul's message was initially met with curiosity, but then derision when he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus. He made so few converts in Athens that when he arrived in Corinth, he resolved never again to rely on intellectual arguments, or exceptional oratory skills in preaching the Gospel. Instead he emphasized the cross of Christ and its power for salvation. Paul's experience in Athens reminded him that no one is called to God through intellectual ideas. Paul told the Corinthians, who had become divided by loyalties to different apostles, that faith is a gift bestowed by the power of God alone.

The gift of faith, once accepted, demands an active response. Jesus suggested that a fitting response is to live a life characterized by good deeds. Jesus did not mean that good deeds are the price of admission to his kingdom, but when they are motivated by love and gratitude, they are a visible sign of God's power at work in the lives of disciples who are helping him build the kingdom of God.

### Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

#### Reading I: Isaiah 58:7-10

**True holiness is found in right relationships with one another.**

- Isaiah's audience had recently returned from exile.
- They were frustrated that the restoration of Jerusalem was taking so long.
- Isaiah is unsympathetic and tells them to share, regardless of disappointments.

#### Responsorial Psalm: Ps.112: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9.

**A just man is a light in darkness to the upright.**

#### Reading II: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

**Paul's second illustration of holiness: become transparent to let God's light shine through.**

- Paul met rejection in Corinth.
- Paul says he can't rely on human eloquence.
- He wants faith to have a strong foundation.

#### Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16

**Salt is another image of holiness, and saltiness is given by God.**

- Jesus' disciples are to be like salt, constant and self-giving.
- Light symbolizes the goodness of the disciples, their sharing the life of God, who is light.
- Those who see the light in the disciples will praise, not the disciples, but God.

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# Salty Communities

Did you ever try to un-salt what you were cooking? It's nigh well impossible. Once salt has permeated the food it's there; the only solution is to try to dilute it.

That's an interesting fact to remember as we hear today's Gospel. When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world," the "you" he addressed were the disciples who had just heard him say, "Blessed are you when they insult and persecute you because of me." Remembering who is in the audience throws a particular light upon the message we're hearing. To be certain that we understand Jesus' point we should recall that in the first six beatitudes — the Gospel we heard last week — Jesus spoke in the third person (Blessed are the poor in spirit), he didn't get personal (blessed are you) until he talked about suffering for his sake. Jesus was saying that his message is so provocative that those who propagate it will be persecuted, but they will have made a difference. They've salted the situation, and there's no undoing the influence they've had.

Tertullian, an early Christian author wrote in the late second century about the futility of persecuting Christians: "No cruelty of yours, though each were to exceed the last in its exquisite refinement, profits you in the least; but forms rather an attraction to our sect. We spring up in greater numbers as often as we are mown down by you: the blood of the Christians is a source of new life" (Apologeticus, Chapter 50). Eventually Constantine understood that message and stopped the persecutions. His tolerance allowed Christianity to become main-stream beliefs and since then, his policy has threatened to dilute the saltiness of the faith.

The last thing Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount was a mainstream faith. In a passage from an anonymous Christian to a pagan named Diognetus, it was said: "Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs ... they do not follow an eccentric manner of life." But they were still unique. Christians seemed to know what they were about and they not only didn't worry about what others thought about it, but they were willing to lose everything for the sake of their faith. The early Christians of whom the authors spoke were people who may have seemed ordinary, but underneath it all, they were different. They were salt and light in a world they considered insipid and murky.

How? How did being salt and light go together with Jesus' teaching about not trumpeting your good deeds — even to the extent that your right hand should not know what the left hand is doing? (See Matthew 6:1-4). Since much of what Jesus says makes more sense to people who live in a communally oriented culture, we may better understand it through that lens. An individualist culture values independence, personal achievement and success; it thrives on competition. A communally oriented culture values family or community over individual rights; it prizes unity and cohesion, cooperation and the group's reputation. Both types can be destructive when taken to an extreme: individualists become treacherously egoistic and collectivists can squash the uniqueness of the human person. Each must learn to appreciate the values of the other. As members of an individualist culture we tend to hear Jesus' talk about being the salt and light as calls to each of us as individuals. Jesus' original audience more likely interpreted this as a call to be a light-bearing, salty community. There are some pretty significant implications to taking these words to heart in a communal way.

There's no doubt that Jesus addressed the Sermon on the Mount to a group, a community of disciples. He was calling on them to join together in the work of welcoming and building up God's reign in their midst. They had to do it together — a grain of salt doesn't make a lot of difference, and one light, even if it's well placed, won't make the city on the hill visible in the dark. Not only could they not do it singly, but living in loving community was a key element of their witness to the world.

No matter our cultural background, we need to be aware that Jesus invites us into a communal movement. He doesn't offer a methodology for individual salvation any more than we can light the world by ourselves. Today's reading from Isaiah describes Jesus' communities of salt and light. They enlighten the world because in them the hungry are fed, the homeless are taken in and everybody watches out for one another. They won't dilute their message, and they don't worry about what it costs because they don't believe they can afford to live in the darkness of another kind of world.

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