

Salt and Light

In the name of him who for us fulfilled all the Law's demands, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel we hear Jesus continuing to instruct his disciples in what is a portion of his celebrated Sermon on the Mount. Specifically, Jesus is telling those who follow him what he has called them to be—indeed, what they have become as a result of following Jesus. “You are the salt of the earth”, he tells them. And a bit later he says, “You are the light of the world.” What does he mean by these expressions? Inasmuch as you and I are the followers of Jesus today, the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we'd better find out.

Salt served two primary functions in the ancient world. First it was the main agent of preservation. They had no refrigerators or freezers back then, nor was there any way to do canning – that wasn't invented until the 1800s. So if you wanted to preserve meat or fish, the only way to do it was to soak it in brine or rub it with salt and hang it up to dry, often using a smoky fire to keep flies off it until the meat was sufficiently cured. The other use of salt was the same one we use it for today. It makes food taste better – not just salty, it enhances the natural flavor of most foods. Things taste flat and unappealing without it. Both of these ideas are contained in what Jesus means when he calls you the salt of the earth. On one hand, you are what preserves this earth. You're the only reason it still exists. The Lord keeps the earth going only for the sake of his people, those who are alive and following him now, those who will yet turn to him in faith, and those believers who are yet to be born. If there wasn't anyone who fit into the latter two of these categories, then there would be no sense in letting this age go on. And when the last one of God's chosen people comes to faith and salvation through Christ, well, let's just say you won't need to be saving for your retirement after that. So that's one idea with the salt: you are what preserves the earth. On the other hand, you are what gives life its flavor. How's that? Well, as a disciple of Jesus and someone who walks in his way, you are person through whom Christ does his work in the world. Yours are the hands through which he performs his works of mercy, love, and kindness, by which he supplies the needy, and by which he assists those who require help. Life on this earth would be unpleasant indeed, an unappealing monotony of cold, loveless misery without people guided by God's Holy Spirit doing the things he leads them to do. So in that sense you are God's flavoring agent on the earth. You bring the taste of Christ and his love to those around you.

And for those two reasons, Jesus warns you about losing your saltiness. In the land of Israel, most of the salt came from mines down by the Dead Sea. This salt contains a lot of alkaline compounds, which, after being exposed to the air for a long time, acquires a distinctly stale, unpleasant taste. After that, it's no longer useful and has to be thrown out. So there's an implied threat here: that is to say, if your faith in Christ, which comes to you and is refreshed as you continue to hear his Word and receive his forgiveness, is allowed to become stale and unsavory through your neglect of the means of grace or your ongoing involvement in unrepentant sin, you become useless to him and can therefore expect to be cast out.

Moving on from the image of salt, Jesus adds another layer of meaning to what you are as his disciple when he says, “You are the light of the world.” It's really a remarkable statement because according to the Scripture, *Jesus* is the light of the world. The idea here is that as his followers we represent him to the world. We reflect his light: the light of his love and his truth. What people on the outside of the church are going to know about Jesus is what they see and hear coming from you, which is why Jesus tells you it's wrong to try to hide that light. No, he

says, let your light shine so that people will see your good works – that is, the works of Christ performed through you as well as your spoken witness to Christ and what he’s done for you. Then the people who hear and see Christ through you will give glory to God, and hopefully be drawn into the light of Christ themselves.

So this is your calling as a disciple: to be salt and light to those around you; both as an individual in your day to day affairs, and collectively with fellow believers in your place in Christ’s church. And the thing to see is that this does not require some superhuman effort. No, this is what Christ has made you. Just as salt is naturally salty and light shines because that what it does, so too, by virtue of being a disciple of Jesus, you naturally function in these ways. His Word and Spirit within you make it so. In order to be something less it takes deliberate action on your part, like purposeful neglect of God’s Word and the means of grace or blocking the light within you by deliberately suppressing your witness to Christ. Jesus doesn’t *command* his disciples to be salt and light; that’s what you are. He only asks you to be what he’s made you.

Still, we might want to know what this looks like. I mean, when it comes to being salt and light, there are a lot of bad examples out there. And unfortunately, many people on the outside of the church have preconceptions about what Christians are and how they behave based on these bad examples. You have, for instance, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church who stage loud obnoxious protests at the funerals of soldiers and celebrities. They get a disproportionately large amount of publicity shouting insults and holding up signs that say God hates this or that group of people. They create the impression in some people’s minds that all Christians are hateful, condemning, unsympathetic fiends. Then there’s the silly shenanigans that happen on TBN, the Trinity Broadcast Network, which 24 hours a day, seven days a week pumps out to the world a steady stream of jibberish: bad theologians saying stupid things and making false prophecies and promises, and oh, “Keep your money coming in!” It’s really embarrassing to the church of Christ. And these are only a couple of problems among many by which Christianity gets a bad name, which is all the more reason for those of us who do know Jesus Christ and the whole truth of his Gospel to be the salt and light that he has made us.

So, what *does* that look like? What should people see and experience in their interaction with you? Well, because these words of Jesus follow immediately after the Beatitudes we heard in last week’s Gospel, that’s one very good place look for at least part of the answer. And first on that list of a disciple’s attributes is poverty of spirit. Meekness is third; and the two go hand in hand. They both speak to the inward assessment of self. It’s an attitude of humility. You are to think of yourself as the least, insignificant, weak, undeserving – a beggar before God and considering others above yourself. As such, there won’t be pride or arrogance; no task will seem beneath you. Like Jesus, you’ll be eager to serve. When dealing with difficult people and their insults, you’ll be slow to take offense, ready to accept blame – even unjustly, and quick to smooth things over to their satisfaction.

The second Beatitude is “Blessed are those who mourn”. It dovetails nicely with “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The idea here is not that you go about being sad and sorrowful about the state of the world and all the terrible things that happen to you. It’s not about being depressed. No, it’s rather that inwardly you are always very conscious of and deeply sorry for your sin. It means that you regularly take that hard look in the mirror of the soul comparing yourself to God’s perfect standards so that you can see how bad things really are. The result is that you will be all the more grateful to God for sending you a Savior to take the punishment you deserved and crediting you with the righteous life Jesus lived on your behalf. That’s your comfort. That’s your joy. When you are mournful over your sin, ironically, you’re going to be more joyful in your salvation.

And that will spill over to the next attribute of a disciple of Jesus: you'll be merciful to others. You'll be the opposite of the unforgiving servant in the parable who had an immense, impossible to pay debt cancelled and then went out and stubbornly refused to do the same to a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller yet sizable amount. Reflecting constantly on how much God has forgiven you in Christ Jesus, you'll easily let go of your resentment and hard feelings against those who sin against you. You'll happily set them free of any burden of guilt they may feel, and you'll be forgiving, friendly, and open with them even if they don't feel it. You'll also be tolerant of other people's minor foibles and irritating behaviors. This doesn't mean, however, that you'll be dismissive of their ongoing sins. More on that in a bit.

A follower of Jesus seeks purity in spirit. As such, you'll want to avoid sin and the things that lead you to temptation. Instead, as St. Paul told the Philippians, you'll want to direct your thoughts toward that which is good. As he said, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable; if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Doing so you will be drawn closer to Christ and his work, because nothing is more true, honorable, just, pure and so on than that. You'll also be slow to ascribe evil motives to others for their actions, quick to defend them from gossip and attacks on their character, and you'll build them up in the esteem of others by putting the best construction on them and what they do.

As a disciple of Jesus, you are a peacemaker. You'll seek to diffuse conflict between people and try whenever possible to prevent it from happening in the first place. This means also that you do what you can to reconcile people to God. This is what I meant when I said that you don't dismiss the sins of others. If you know someone who is going astray, who is or is becoming involved in sin, say an illicit affair or a destructive behavior, you attempt to bring them back to the narrow way. It means gently speaking the truth in love; not to judge and condemn them, but to keep them from being judged and condemned by God, and to save them and those around them from the pain and heartache that sin invariably brings. And yes, you'll probably risk a friendship over it and you may take some abuse; but what's more important, the number of friends you have or the safety of someone's eternal soul?

All right; leaving the Beatitudes for some of today's other readings, we find a few more attributes of those who follow Jesus. From Isaiah we learn that you'll strive to be compassionate and generous, sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless into your house; when you see someone without adequate clothing, you'll supply them what they need. And this: you'll not hide from your own flesh. It means that charity begins at home. Your first duty is to your own family members – the people you didn't get to pick to be part of your life; the ones God gave you to look after and care for. As I've stated before, this does mean that you become an accomplice to those who are committing the sins of fraudulence and laziness. You look to assist those who are genuinely in need; and there are plenty of them around.

But you can do this fearlessly because you know the Lord is taking care of you. That's what we spoke together in today's Psalm. "It is well with the man who deals generously and lends ... He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord." It means that the follower of Jesus doesn't have to worry "If I give to this person who needs what I have, I may not have enough for myself tomorrow." Quite the contrary, you understand that the Lord gave you the excess you have today in order that you could be his instrument to provide for the immediate needs of those who are without. And you're confident that Lord who took care of you today, will take care of you tomorrow too. And this fearlessness extends to all aspects of life. In the face of disaster, loss, political turmoil, war, terrorism – you name it – the follower of Jesus is not going to be a worrywart. You know that the Lord brings good from evil, and that no matter

how bad things get, he has a plan to bring you through the fire without your even your hair being singed. This, by the way, is a powerful witness to those around you. In dark times the light of your confidence in God's love through Christ shines the brightest, making people want to know the reason for the hope that is within you.

There's much more that could be said; but for a quick summary the Ten Commandments and the Table of Duties are good places to go. Followers of Christ should be known for their virtue, integrity, and chastity: we represent Jesus to each other and to the world. Are you a husband? You should seek to be a good one. Are you a wife? Same thing. Are you a child? Then you should seek to be obedient and helpful to your parents. What's your line of work? You should have a reputation as one who works hard and diligently, using the gifts God has given you for the benefit of others. You should be a loyal citizen, faithfully meeting your obligations to pay taxes and praying for those in positions of authority. In all these ways and in so many more, you are to be the salt and light that Jesus has made you.

It's quite an inventory; one that begs the question, how are you doing? You are the salt of the earth; but what is the taste of Christ you are leaving in the people around you? You are the light of the world. How well is the light of Christ shining forth from you? I can't speak for you, but I know that it's precisely by considering these questions that takes me back to poverty of spirit and hungering and thirsting for the righteousness that Christ gives to undeserving sinners such as me. Then I see what a useless beggar I am before the Lord and I cherish all the more what Christ in love did to save me when he offered his life upon the cross for my sins and for yours.

I invite you to do the same, confident that through me the Lord himself is calling you; and that he who calls will also fill you with his Spirit to give you greater faith in Jesus your Savior. For the more you rely on Christ who is your salt and light, the more of him will be seen in you. When you are weak, he is strong. When you are insufficient, he supplies all that is needed. As John the Baptist said, "I must decrease in order that he may increase." May God grant the same spirit of discipleship to us all, that we may truly be for Christ the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!