

Salt and Light

In the name of him who came to not to abolish but to fulfill all the Law and the Prophets, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel comes to us from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the beginning of which we heard as last week's Gospel. Even if you weren't here to hear it, you're probably familiar the words: it's the section of the Sermon we call the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." and so on. In any case, to refresh all of our memories I just had us sing a poetic version of them in the last hymn.

Why? It's because today's Gospel cannot be understood apart from the Beatitudes. When we hear Jesus say, "You are the salt of the earth" and later "You are the light of the world", he's not talking to humanity in general. No, he's talking to those who are the blessed he just described: namely the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. In other words, he's speaking to his disciples, to those who have assimilated his teaching, who trust in him, and who are faithful to his Word. He's not speaking to the world at large nor to those who only pay him lip service, who hear his teaching allowing it to go in one ear and promptly out the other. Therefore, before we get to what Jesus means when he describes his disciples as the salt and light of the world, we need first to understand what it means to be one of the blessed followers he's talking about.

As fortune would have it, we reviewed the Beatitudes when we celebrated All Saints Day back at the beginning of November, so I'll just do a quick summary. First, we saw that the Beatitudes are not commands, Jesus telling us this is the way we are to be; rather they are statements of fact describing the way things are for the disciples of Jesus. They are poor in spirit. It means that they are bankrupt with respect to God. They have nothing that he requires of them. Spiritual account balance: zero. To be sure, this is true of all people. No one has anything good or fitting to offer the Lord. We are sinners. Sin is all we've got. The difference is that the poor in spirit know it. They are blessed because instead of looking within themselves to find any sign of goodness that might merit salvation, they look outside of themselves to the salvation God gives them in Christ.

They mourn. They are filled with sorrow on account of their lives in the present world. They hate their sin and are ashamed of it. They hate too the consequences of sin, how it leads to so much suffering in broken relationships, abuse, anger, conflict, sickness, pain, and death. They are blessed because God will comfort them, which doesn't mean that he'll pat them on the back to cheer them up; no, comfort in this sense comes from the Latin "com fortus", which means "given strength". God will give them what they need to endure life's hardships.

They are meek. They don't think of themselves as better than others. They possess an appropriate sense of humility, knowing that they are undeserving of God's gracious gifts, and thus they are willing to serve others as they themselves have been served by the Lord.

They hunger and thirst for righteousness; not their own, but the righteousness that is credited to them by faith in Jesus. Thus, they seek to be where this righteousness is delivered to them: in the proclamation of God's Word and the Sacraments. They are blessed because God fills their ears with the announcement of his forgiveness and fills their mouths with Christ's

body and blood. Through these means he creates and sustains in them the faith that receives the righteousness of Christ.

They are merciful to those who hurt or offend them, because they know how much more mercy they have received after having hurt and offended the Lord. They are pure in heart. They don't think the worst about others, pretending to be able to read minds and ascribing evil motives to them. No, they remain ever hopeful, looking for the best in others, interpreting their actions with charity, trying to see things in a positive light, and putting the best construction on everything. They are peacemakers. As Christ by his sacrificial death and resurrection has given them peace with God, so they seek to resolve conflicts and to be at peace with all people.

And they are persecuted. Because the world at large is at war with God and his kingdom, those who enter his kingdom must face the wrath and opposition of the world. But that is no cause for fear. Rather, it encourages them because they know that such persecution puts them in the good company of apostles, prophets, and martyrs who likewise suffered for their faith – indeed, whose faith was purified and hardened through such trials of fire – and who have since received the crown of life.

Those are the Beatitudes. They describe the way the disciples of Jesus *are*. So, if you are a disciple of Jesus, they describe *you*. And you're probably thinking, "Oh yeah? They sure don't sound like me." Actually, they do. And you're right: at the same time, they don't. What they describe is the new nature that God has created in you by the power of his Word and the work of the Holy Spirit. All disciples of Jesus possess this new nature. If you trust in Christ, it's there. It's just not always evident because it coexists with your old sinful nature. And the fact that you know that the Beatitudes don't describe you completely demonstrates that you are aware that your sin nature is very much present, which in turn means that you are aware of your spiritual poverty. And that takes us back to the first Beatitude. See? It is you.

Our goal, of course, is to constantly put to death that sin nature through repentance so that the new nature becomes more and more evident. And to the extent that we do, the new nature that God is generating and sustaining in us will be the salt and light of the world that Jesus speaks of. And now we're ready to unpack what he means by that.

Salt had two major functions in the ancient world. First, it was used as a preservative. In a day before refrigeration and freezers, the only way to prevent meat, fish, and some other produce like olives from rotting was to pack them in salt and dry them out. We who are disciples of Jesus act as preservatives for the world. You ask, "Why does the Lord allow the world with all of its problems to go on?" The answer is that he does it for the sake of those who are being saved out of the world through faith in Christ. The world continues because the Lord does not want any to perish, but for all to come to a knowledge of his truth in Christ and to be saved. We are right to look forward to the end when the dead will be raised, and we will enter into the new heaven and earth; but for the present our task is to preserve this world so that God's work of reaching the lost and making disciples may continue. We have also the pleasure in participating in this work through our support of church and its missions, as well as our own personal witness to our family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors.

The other thing salt does is acts as a flavor enhancer. Without some salt, most foods taste bland and unappealing. A little salt helps you to taste things the way they should. It makes life better. And in this fallen world so full of trouble, hatred, revenge, sadness, and suffering, Christ's faithful people do the same thing. In our day it's become popular for the enemies of the faith to push the idea that Christianity has made the world worse. They point to

religious wars of the past and to certain abuses and they say we'd all be better off without it. Such claims couldn't be farther from the truth. The truth is that you would not want to live in a world that was not heavily influenced by Christianity and the virtues like love, mercy, kindness, and forgiveness that it extols. One does not have to study history in great detail to see that the whole idea for creating hospitals, universities, orphanages, and charities of all kinds grew out of the Church. And so many of the problems that we see in today's society are arising from turning away from a biblical worldview: rejecting the sanctity of human life, denying the goodness of being created male and female in God's image, discarding the holiness of marriage and family, and so on. Have there been abuses committed in the name of the Church? Yes. But they were not because the tenants of the faith were being lived out by God's people. They happened because people in the Church were being unfaithful.

And Jesus warns us of becoming salt that loses its saltiness. That sounds like an impossibility. How can salt become unsalty? The answer is that the salt used in first century Palestine came mostly from mines down by the Dead Sea. It contained a number of contaminants, chiefly gypsum. It's fine when freshly mined and for some period thereafter, but over prolonged exposure to the air it develops a strong disagreeable stale flavor. At which point it's useless either as a preservative or a flavor enhancer. The point is that your salt supply needed to be refreshed on a regular basis. And so, it is for the disciples of Jesus: we need constant renewal by the very means of grace that calls us to repentance, to living faith in Christ, and to the sanctifying work of the Spirit through whom God makes us the beneficial salt of the world.

And he also makes us the light of the world. Light, we know, is what reveals. Without it there's no vision, no understanding, no distinction between truth and falsehood. In the fullest sense, Jesus says that he is the Light of the world. But because he indwells us by faith, his light is to shine forth from us: the light of his truth, his love, his forgiveness. What people sitting in the dark will see of Christ is what they see of him in us. In fact, the word "Christian" means "little Christ". That is what he has made us. Thus, we make it our goal to let his light shine through our words and actions. And when and where we fall short, as we do time and again, we confess our sins and failures, we receive his forgiveness and the renewal of his Spirit, and we continue to let his light shine.

It is Christ's work in us that makes us his disciples and causes the Beatitudes to apply to us. And thus, it is his work in us that makes us the salt and light of the world. We pray, therefore, that the Lord would continue his work in and through us – that we be his salt and light for the benefit of the world – until he brings all his work to completion and we enter into our eternal rest in him. May he grant it to us and to the world for the sake of Jesus our Savior. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!