

## 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 58:7-10
<i>Response</i>	The just man is a light in darkness to the upright.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9,
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 2:1-5
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the light of the world, says the Lord; whoever follows me will have the light of life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 5:13-16

On the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Church begins its second week of working through Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. On this Sunday, the theme is twofold, we are going to be looking at Jesus's teachings about calling his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. These are both very famous expressions, but we want to go back and look at them in context and try to unpack what they would've meant for his first disciples in a first century Jewish context. So the reading is from Matthew chapter 5:13-16 — it is a shorter Gospel this week — and it says this:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so let's look at each of these images separately. First, we will begin with the salt of the earth. What does Jesus mean by calling his disciples the salt of the earth? Well in the Old Testament on several occasions — like in the book of Job

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

6:6 — salt is described as being used like we use it today, to give food flavor. So if you want to add flavor to food, you are going to put salt into the meal. And if you don't have any salt, the meal will be tasteless, it will be bland. And that clearly seems to be the primary meaning here because notice what Jesus is saying, “if salt has lost its taste, how shall it be restored?” In other words, it is not good for anything, so you would just throw it away. Now there is a twist though here and many people have pointed it out. It is this — it is real simple — real salt doesn't lose its flavor, it doesn't become unsalty.

So this is a classic example — we will see this throughout the Gospel Matthew — of one of Jesus' parables or teachings where he will have something that's kind of unexpected or a surprise or a little bit of a twist. Kind of like we just saw with the Beatitudes last week. “Blessed are they” or “happy are they who mourn.” What!?! What are you doing? Jesus uses this all the time to get our attention, to call our attention to some deeper truth that he is trying to illuminate. So he's not talking about real salt — real salt doesn't lose its flavor. If it did lose its flavor, however, what good would it be? It would be worthless, and it would just be worth throwing out and being trampled underfoot. So what Jesus is doing here is he's trying to point to the disciples and he is using a metaphor. They are like salt, and they're meant to add something to the world, to add some kind of flavor to the world, and if they don't have it themselves, if they lose that saltiness themselves, they're worthless, they are not living up to who they are called to be as disciples of Jesus.

Now with that said, this is kind of a strange metaphor, it seems a little bit weird unless you add a second dimension of meaning to it. In the Old Testament, salt is not simply used to refer to adding flavor to just any meal. In the book of Leviticus, it is very specifically described as adding flavor to a certain meal. Namely the sacrifices in the Temple. So if you go back to the book of Leviticus 2:13 just for a second — this isn't in the lectionary, but I think it's important background — it says this (it's describing how to prepare sacrifices in the tabernacle):

You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking from your cereal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.

That is Leviticus 2:13, and we see the same thing in other passages in the Old Testament. So for example, in the book of Numbers 18:19, it talks about the salt of the covenant; in the book of Ezekiel 43:24, it talks about how the priest — before they would offer sacrifice — they would always sprinkle it with salt. If we go back to Leviticus 2:13 and we look at the context there, the kind of sacrifice that the salt is being added to is known as a cereal offering. Now that can be misleading for an English reader because when we think of cereal, we think of a modern-day breakfast cereal, whether your favorite cereal is Froot Loops, Frosted Flakes or it might be Cap'n Crunch. Obviously that is not what the book of Leviticus is talking about here. The cereal offering is a translation of the Hebrew word *minchah*, which literally means just a bread or a grain offering. So you had these cereal offerings that would often be offered to God in the form of a caked bread — sometimes mixed with oil — and interestingly often offered on the altar with bread and wine, so as an offering of bread and wine. So it was kind of like a meal that you would share with God. So the salt is added to the cereal offering to signify the covenant banquet between you and God. It is something that is essential for a sacrifice that is being offered to the Lord. “With all your offerings you shall offer salt,” Leviticus says. So there may be a deeper meaning going on when we go back to the Sermon on the Mount.

A number of scholars have suggested that when Jesus refers to his disciples as the salt of the earth, he is not just talking about common everyday salt that is used to give flavor to an everyday meal, but that he's in a sense using this as a metaphor and likening them to the salt of the covenant sacrifices that would be offered to God in the temple. And this makes a lot of sense if we look at the rest of the New Testament. For example, in Romans 12 Paul is going to call the Christians in Rome to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice to the Lord. In other words, that the Christian vocation is not just to offer sacrifice to God, but to become a sacrificial offering to the Lord for the salvation of the world in union with Christ, who is going to offer himself as the ultimate sacrifice on the cross and then the ultimate sacrifice in the true cereal offering, the bread offering of the Eucharist.

So this is a really deep and rich metaphor that Jesus is using here, that the disciples are called to be the salt of the earth that is going to season the world so that the world itself, in a sense, might be offered up to God as a pleasing sacrifice, as a cereal offering that will bind him to the world in the new and everlasting covenant.

Now obviously that is getting a little ahead of ourselves, we haven't gotten to the Last Supper yet, but you can already see the seeds of that kind of sacrificial theology just in the very metaphor that Jesus is using here. "You are the salt of the earth." Obviously too, the negative dimension of that is that if the disciples themselves lose their "saltiness," in other words, if they break covenant with God, if they don't remain faithful to God, then there is no way that they're going to be able to sanctify the world and bring the world to God as an offering to him in sacrifice and in the worship of the New Covenant. So there is a lot hidden in a little with this saying here. Alright so that is the salt of the earth.

What about the light of the world? This one is a little easier to understand, especially if you know the Old Testament prophets. If you go back, for example, to the prophet Isaiah, on a number of occasions in Isaiah chapters 42 and 49, the prophet Isaiah describes Israel as being called by God to be a "light to the nations." This image here is of Israel shining the light of truth, shining the light of the covenant, shining the light of the law upon the darkness of the many nations — the Gentile nations of the world — who were caught in not just immorality, but idolatry and a general ignorance of the ways of God, of the revelation of God, of the law of God, and of the worship of God. So Israel's vocation wasn't simply to be the chosen people of God, as if Israel was chosen and the Gentiles were rejected. No! Israel was chosen by God for the salvation of the world, like in the book of Exodus 19 God says, "I want you to be a kingdom of priests," and in Exodus 4 he says, "Israel is my firstborn son." What does that mean? Well it means Israel is the first born son, but the rest of the Gentiles are like the second and third born. They are the younger sons in the family of God and Israel's vocation is to be the example, to be the shining light, to be a light to the nations.

So in the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus is doing is basically revealing to the disciples, "you are the new Israel, you are the true Israel of God and I'm calling you to be a light not just to the nations, to be the light of the world." Now if you have any doubts about that, the image of a city set on a hill confirms it. If you look in the book of Isaiah 2 or 60, or Micah 4, the new Jerusalem spoken of by the prophets, this great and glorious city of Jerusalem that would come about in the new creation, in the new heavens and the new earth, is often described as being raised up at the top of the mountain, as set upon a great mountain, the highest of all the mountains of the earth. So the city set on a hill is an image of the new

Jerusalem. So the disciples here are called to be the new Israel and to be a new Jerusalem, and just like Israel was called to be a light to the world, Jesus is basically saying to them that they are going to be the example that leads the nations, the Gentile nations, to right worship, to true faith in God, and to the new law of the Gospel.

Now with that said — with those Old Testament allusions out of the way — Jesus uses what appears to be a somewhat more mundane example. He just basically uses an image of a household lamp. So he's describing here probably a small wicker oil lamp that was common at the time, which people would put up in a house on a lampstand to give light to the house in darkness. Well Jesus says here, “no one lights a lamp and then sticks it under a bushel basket,” right!? That would defeat the purpose. Just like salt without flavor defeats the purpose of even using salt, a light under a bushel basket defeats the whole purpose. So their task of being the light of the world is to let their light shine before others. How do they do this? Notice something very interesting here in verse 16, Jesus says “let your light shine before men, so that they may see” what? What exactly is it the disciples are called to shine before others?

Jesus is very explicit here, it's their good works. The Greek word here is *kala erga*. It is very explicit: *good works*. Why do I emphasize that? Well because in some Christian traditions there is a rejection of the idea that works have any value whatsoever. The idea going back to Martin Luther was that we are saved by faith alone and works don't have any importance whatsoever. You definitely don't see that kind of theology in the Gospels when you look at Jesus. Jesus is very often emphasizing the critical role that good works are going to play, not just in the salvation of an individual person's soul, but in the salvation of the world. So he is saying that the good works of his disciples are precisely the visible means that are going to draw other people into the kingdom — into the kingdom of God. And the goal of performing these good works — he makes clear here — is not so that each individual person would get glory, but so that God the Father might be glorified. So there's no tension here between this statement and, as we will see later in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus will say “don't perform your good work so that others may see them, but do it in secret.” We will get to that a little bit later, but there he is going to be talking about particular works of piety that people can be tempted to do in order to get others to think that they're holy. That is going to be a

danger that he will address, but right here he's just talking about what we would call evangelization — bearing witness to the whole world about the truth of the good news, about the truth of the Gospel and the new law of Christ. By living the new law of Christ that he is giving on the Sermon on the Mount, they will bring about the salvation that the prophets spoke of in the book of Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament.

Another thing, by the way, someone might say “wait a second, there's a contradiction here, because in the Gospel of John 8 Jesus says ‘I am the light of the world’” (chapter 8:12). So is Jesus the light of the world or are the disciples the light of the world?” The answer is yes, it’s both, it’s both-and, it’s a classic Catholic both-and. It's not that Jesus is the light or we are the light, it is both. The light that the disciples are going to shine in the world only comes through their union with, an imitation of, Jesus. He is the source of all of the light of the Gospel, but it is going to shine through his disciples and out into the world because of them. That's the imagery being used here. That is the Gospel reading for today.

What about Old Testament texts? What Old Testament passages did the Church put before us? Well here we see even further illumination on the salt of the earth and the light of the world by going back to the book of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 58:7-10, the first reading describes some of the very same images that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount. It describes how good works and acts of charity can be light to others. So this is the passages, it says this — again Isaiah is speaking to the people of Israel and he is describing the will of the Lord:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?  
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.  
"If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,

the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,  
if you pour yourself out for the hungry  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
then shall your light rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be as the noonday.

This is a beautiful passage. What is Isaiah saying here? Basically he is describing three acts of charity: feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and clothe the naked. And the result of these acts of charity is that the light of Israel, when they engage in those kind of works, will break forth like the dawn. In other words, it will be like the sunrise bringing light to a world that's full of suffering and sin and death and darkness. That's how charity acts, that's what charity does in this world. So that's what Israel is called to be and that is what Israel is called to do.

And the same thing is true in the Responsorial Psalm. So if you look at the Responsorial Psalm, it's Psalm 112 — a beautiful little Psalm — it is describing the characteristics of a righteous person. And this is what it says — again note the image of light:

Light rises in the darkness for the upright;  
the LORD is gracious, merciful, and righteous.  
It is well with the man who deals generously and lends,  
who conducts his affairs with justice.  
For the righteous will never be moved;  
he will be remembered for ever.  
He is not afraid of evil tidings;  
his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.  
His heart is steady, he will not be afraid,  
until he sees his desire on his adversaries.

And then in verse 9 it says these very important words:

He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;  
his righteousness endures for ever;  
his horn is exalted in honor.

Notice what is being described here. It is describing a person who is righteous. Why is he righteous? Not because he is flawless, but because he is generous. So he lends money, and not just begrudgingly, it says he lends it lavishly. So he's generous with the poor, he lends money lavishly, he gives it away. He doesn't just do business fairly — so he is just. He's also trusting in God, he's faithful. It also says that he does business fairly and he is not just fair, he's steadfast, he's trusting in the Lord and he is also merciful. So we see here a continuity of themes. These Old Testament texts are the kind of thing Jesus is talking about, the kind of charity he is describing when he talks about becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

So what does this mean for us today and what did it mean in the living tradition of the Church? Just a quick couple of final points. First, if you look at that first text from Isaiah for this week, Isaiah 58, you see three of what later were known in the church as the corporal works of mercy, these traditional seven acts of charity or works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick sitting, visiting those in prison and then burying the dead. So those seven works we call the corporal works of mercy and we already saw Isaiah describe the first three of them: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked.

Now when we combine Isaiah 58 with another passage — it isn't used for this week — the famous passage in the Gospel of Matthew about the sheep and the goats, we see exactly what the Church is wanting us to think about when we're asking “what does it mean to be a light of the world? What does it mean to be salt of the earth?” It means above all to be engaged in acts of charity, corporal works of mercy, and through them to engage in evangelization, to share the Gospel with the world. And sometimes Catholics can be tempted in particular to think that that's the work of missionaries. That's what Mother Teresa, the daughters of Charity, they engage in those kind of works but I can't do that in my own life. I'm not a missionary, I'm not a religious. But if you look at Jesus' teaching in the Gospel, it's very clear that this call to engage in the works of mercy is not just restricted to his disciples, and it's not restricted to what we would think of today as consecrated religious or the clergy. It's something that everyone, every disciple of

Jesus, is called to, and if we neglect it we put our salvation in danger. Pope Francis has talked about this recently on a number of occasions.

If you look at Matthew 25, just to round it out — the famous passage from the sheep and the goats. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus says:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

But why?

for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

So this is a pretty sobering text there, but that's the basis for the Church's exhortation for us to engage in the corporal works of mercy. It also brings you back to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says “if salt loses its saltiness, what good is it except to be cast out and trodden underfoot by men.” As a number of interpreters have pointed out, whenever Jesus talks about being cast out in the Gospel of Matthew, he frequently uses that as an image for being cast out of the kingdom of heaven, as an image for being separated from God, for losing one’s salvation. So if you're going to be a disciple of Jesus and follow the Sermon on the Mount, you really don't have a choice, so to speak, when it comes to engaging in acts of charity, works of mercy and evangelization. This is part of the obligation of a disciple in the Gospel, but is also, by the way, not just an obligation. Remember, we just heard him talk about the Beatitudes — the secret of how to be happy. Well he's still talking about how to be happy in these next passages. The whole Sermon on the Mount is going to be about not just how to live, but how to be happy in life as a disciple. So true happiness will only ever be found when, as Christians, we live according to who we are in Christ. Namely, the salt of the earth,

offering our sufferings and sacrifices in union with Christ to the Father, bringing others to God — to offer the world to him— and then also light of the world, following the work of Christ, engaging in good works, so that people can give glory to God in heaven. This is an essential call that we have as Christians, it is not an optional thing.

I might add as an aside, I recently read a short article on this by a Catholic writer — I forget who it was — who was pointing out that the corporal works of mercy are something that we can engage in our own family, especially for those of you like me if you have a young family, so if you have young children. A large part of a young parent's life and time is precisely taken up by engaging in corporal works of mercy like feeding the hungry. Who's hungrier than an infant? Who is hungrier than a little child? Every meal has to be taken care of by the parent. Clothing the naked. For the first few years of your child's life, every time they get dressed, every time they get undressed, who is doing it? The parents are doing it. So you are feeding the hungry, you are clothing the naked, what about sickness? Visiting the sick, caring for the sick? Well — especially if you have a big Catholic family as you know — if one person gets the flu, everybody gets the flu; if one person gets a virus, everybody gets a virus. And one of the the struggles in that is entering into it and caring for one another, even in the midst of sickness and suffering. And so on and so forth...I could make a joke about visiting the imprisoned if one of the kids gets sent to their room — being punished — you could go in and in the middle of that show mercy and show love.

There are all kinds of ways to apply this within family life. And you don't have to have children, you can apply it within your family, your brothers, your sisters or your parents — you might have elderly parents living with you that you have to feed ,that you have to even maybe clothe, if they are getting to old to clothe themselves. We don't have to join a missionary order to engage in the corporal works of mercy. This is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It's part of what it means to follow the law of the gospel, which is the Sermon on the Mount. So I think this is a very important text that the Church is putting before us on this Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time. I would just add, in closing, that this is in some ways the most effective form of evangelization. The catechism has this quote in paragraph 904 that evangelization — meaning to “lead others to faith” — is “the task of every preacher and of each believer.” So we are all called to evangelize,

but we have to do it in our own sphere and in our own state of life. One of the most powerful ways to do this is precisely through acts of charity and the corporal works of mercy, which help us to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.