



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

February 5, 2017

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

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-beliefs. stream 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.

Isaiah 58:7-10

This selection from Isaiah 58 presents God's answer when the people complained: "We're doing such good and holy things! Why don't you notice and do what we want?" The people detail their sacrifices, the ascetic practices they used to get God's attention. Putting on sackcloth and ashes was like putting on a shroud and having the dust of the earth cover them, thereby simulating death. Bowing their heads was a sign of mourning and some penances even included self-flagellation (cf. Isaiah 58:1-5). They did all this to prove how pious and sincere they were. But God's response was crystal clear: "The fast you are keeping today will not give you a hearing on high" (58:4). The people sought God "day after day," but God answered their grumbling by pointing out that their fast days were no different from any other day; fasting or feasting, they sought to fulfill their own will while they drove their workers into the ground. God's question to them could be paraphrased: "How do you have the nerve to complain as if you were a nation that does justice?" God then went on to tell them that when they made life better for others they would find their own life improved as well.

Isaiah's people were not alone in their injudicious attempts to bribe God with sacrifice. Isn't it ironic that religion has so often valued asceticism, self-denial and austerity? Those are virtues more in line with John the Baptist than Jesus. What child thinks he's going to garner his parents' favor by denying himself? The little boy who wants something from his mom will clean his room and take out the trash. The suspicious mother may be on guard for what's coming next, but she knows that he's trying to make her happy — even if for self-serving reasons. In the case of the people who were fasting, God's answer was simple: "You're putting on quite a show, but I'm not entertained." Then, because they hadn't seemed to get the message in the first 50 or 100 times it had been delivered, the prophet repeats the traditional

teaching about what really pleases God.

As always, there are some ideas that are richer in the original languages than in translation. A more literal translation makes it clearer that God is asking people to offer the needy room and board in their own homes. This is not a case of taking food to a shelter or even covering the bill for a night's stay at Motel 6, but bringing the hungry and homeless to the dinner table with the family. And speaking of the family, the literal translation for "do not turn your back on your own" is more like "don't hide from your family."

When you do these things, says the Lord, you will be healed, and your light will shine, not because of what you've earned, but what you've learned. Being with God's beloved ones, people who hope mightily and see God's hand in every kindness done to them, is the greatest possible tutorial in spirituality. Most simply, this reading tells us that the poor and needy are the people who can lead us to God and reveal where God is at work in our world.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Paul's conversion was the sort of turning point that changed everything for him. It wasn't simply a move from persecutor to proselytizer; all of his references were transformed. Although we don't know much about his background, it's obvious that he was an intelligent and well-educated man, a graduate of the best schools of his day, so to speak. Therefore, when he goes to the Corinthians saying "I did not come with sublimity of words or wisdom," it's a concrete sign of what he said in Philippians 3:7 — his social advantages were no better than trash in the light of knowing Christ.

The cross was such a counter-intuitive sign that anyone who came to believe in Christ would never see anything else the same way in the future. The cross was God's revelation of power in very apparent weakness, of eternal victory in the guise of death. It's very hard for those of us who were surrounded by Christian symbols during our entire lives to understand how scandalous the cross was — and still is. To the extent that we have gotten over its shock value we've probably lost its meaning. Anyone who believes in the cross becomes very suspicious of anything that looks like popular success — in Paul's day and in ours.

Paul said he proclaimed a "mystery." We might better understand that if we realize that his emphasis was not so much on preaching or proclaiming the mystery as it

was on leading his people into an experience of the Spirit like the one he had undergone. As he said, he avoided enticements and impressive speech so that their faith “might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God.”

This reading challenges us on multiple levels. At first glance it calls us to examine whether or not we believe as does Paul that it is the cross, Christ’s act of total self-giving, that convinces us and calls us to imitation of him, or if we are more like “cultural Christians,” people along for the ride as long as it doesn’t get too uncomfortable.

That question quickly leads to a deeper one: What is our experience of God? When Paul talks about the “mystery” of God, he’s referring to a faith experience that goes beyond the pragmatic, the understandable and the safe. When we are open to this mystery we become as vulnerable as Paul was and susceptible to a deep-seated rethinking of all we thought we knew. That brings us to a radical juncture where we need to choose whether to have faith in God or in our own ideas and concepts. It is only when we hold our own convictions lightly that we can be open to God’s ongoing revelation.

Paradoxically, it requires immense faith to question our beliefs. But that is what Paul suggests in this reading. Paul the preacher wanted to lead his people to an experience of God. He refused to propose a well-crafted argument or proof of anything. Instead he offered a mind-blowing encounter with the power of the cross, a power that would draw the Corinthians into greater loving even as it questioned what seemed to make good sense. His words invite us to the same.

Matthew 5:13-16

As we continue through the Sermon on the Mount, we must remember that although many see Jesus here as the new Moses, he is not acting as a law-giver, but rather a dispenser of wisdom. The Beatitudes were conundrums, counterintuitive sayings that make sense only when we reflect on them from practice. In addition, although the entire sermon is generally thought to be a collection of teachings rather than a homily delivered all at one time, Matthew framed it as a discourse and therefore wanted his readers to take it as such. With that in mind we need to remember that Jesus addressed the statements about salt and light to *you*, meaning those disciples to whom he had previously just stated “blessed are those who are persecuted.”

Jesus was a great one for playing with words, and he did so in the saying about salt. Salt, in addition to its attributes as a flavor enhancer and food preservative, was a common metaphor for wisdom. So, the word Jesus used for the idea of salt losing its flavor was one which could connote foolishness. That concept makes for a great addition to what Paul had to say about human wisdom and the power of God. Following up on the last phrase of the beatitudes, Jesus indicates that persecuted disciples who are blessed and possess the kingdom of heaven are the salty wise ones. But if they lose that saltiness, their wisdom truly becomes folly, not only for them, but in the sight of the world that laughs because they gave up on what they had begun.

The second pair of images, the light and shining city on the hilltop is even more powerful when understood in a biblical context. Light was a common symbol for God's word: "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105); and even for God: "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Psalm 27:1). The city on the hilltop was Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God (Micah 4:1-3). With these images Jesus teaches that the persecuted and blessed disciples are an extension of God's very presence in the world, a presence that can never be hidden or snuffed out.

Planning: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

We live in dark times. War and terrorism, global climate change, political polarization, social upheaval, racial tensions, wage stagnation, wealth inequality and many other issues confront us every day. And for many in the Northern Hemisphere, February seems one of the bleakest months of the year, as we wait for signs of spring and new life.

On February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, also called Candlemas Day, we celebrated the presence of the Light of the World in our midst. Today's readings also focus on light, calling us to become lights in the darkness by letting Christ's light shine through us.

The first reading assures us that light will rise in the darkness if we reach out to those in need as well as stop oppression and negative speech. Those are difficult challenges, but they are ones we are called to embrace and strive to meet day after

day. The psalm refrain insists that the just person is a light in the darkness. The second reading does not mention light but reminds us that whatever good we can do flows from the power of the Spirit within us. In the Gospel, Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That Gospel passage has inspired the naming of various groups such as Salt and Light TV and Communities of Salt and Light that are devoted to reaching out to the world with the message of Christ.

These readings call us again to consider how well our worship is leading people to take the Gospel to the streets, as Pope Francis has called us to do. Does your parish shine as a light in your neighborhood? Are people drawn to your community of faith by what they see you doing in the area?

Perhaps even more basic, does your worship enlighten those who participate? Does it help them understand and embrace the mission that Christ has entrusted to us? Does it fire up parishioners to go forth and spread the good news of God's mercy? Does it make a difference in their daily lives?

One would hope that we can all answer "yes" to those questions, but undoubtedly there is more that we can do, more that we can be. As we move through this liturgical year, and maybe especially as we prepare for Lent, we need to keep these challenges in mind so that the preaching and the prayers, the music and the hospitality, and everything we do becomes oriented to linking worship and mission, worship and daily life. What is the next step you can take to move your liturgies in that direction?

Prayers: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

What does it mean to be salt, light, a city built on a mountain? Today's readings remind us that, as baptized Christians, we can't hide. God — who is a God of justice and mercy — had expectations of Israel. The Israelites weren't off the hook regarding how they were to act, and neither are the followers of Jesus. God has expectations of us. People see us, they observe what we do and how we act. What are they seeing? We can't be followers in name only.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you call us to be the salt of the earth: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to be the light of the world: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be a city set on a mountain: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray now that Christ's light may shine through us for the whole world.

Minister For the all baptized Christians: that we may live as salt and light for others...we pray,

- For those who sit in the darkness of poverty, violence, war or injustice...we pray,
- For those whose light has dimmed, who need support to live as Christ's disciples...we pray,
- For those who will not let the light of others shine...we pray,
- For those held captive by the internal darkness of doubt, depression, lack of faith or self-worth...we pray,
- For individuals and organizations whose work is to bring light to others or zest to their lives...we pray,
- For the ministers of our diocese and our parish: that they may truly be light for others...we pray,
- For those who are surrounded by the darkness of illness or grief; and for those who have died...(name)...we pray,

Presider God who guides us, you call your people to show your endless love to others. Give us the courage to live as we are called and to reflect your light to those who sit in darkness. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who showed us how to be light for others. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle A Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)